THE CREATORS ISSUE

Rolling Stone

MAY 2023 >> ISSUE 1375

STARRING

ÉMMA CHAMBERLAIN

How a high school dropout changed YouTube and took over podcasting — by doing whatever the hell she wants

20 MOST INFLUENTIAL

TIKTOK'S HOTTEST TRACKS

WELCOME TO THE AGE OF CRINGE

PLUS

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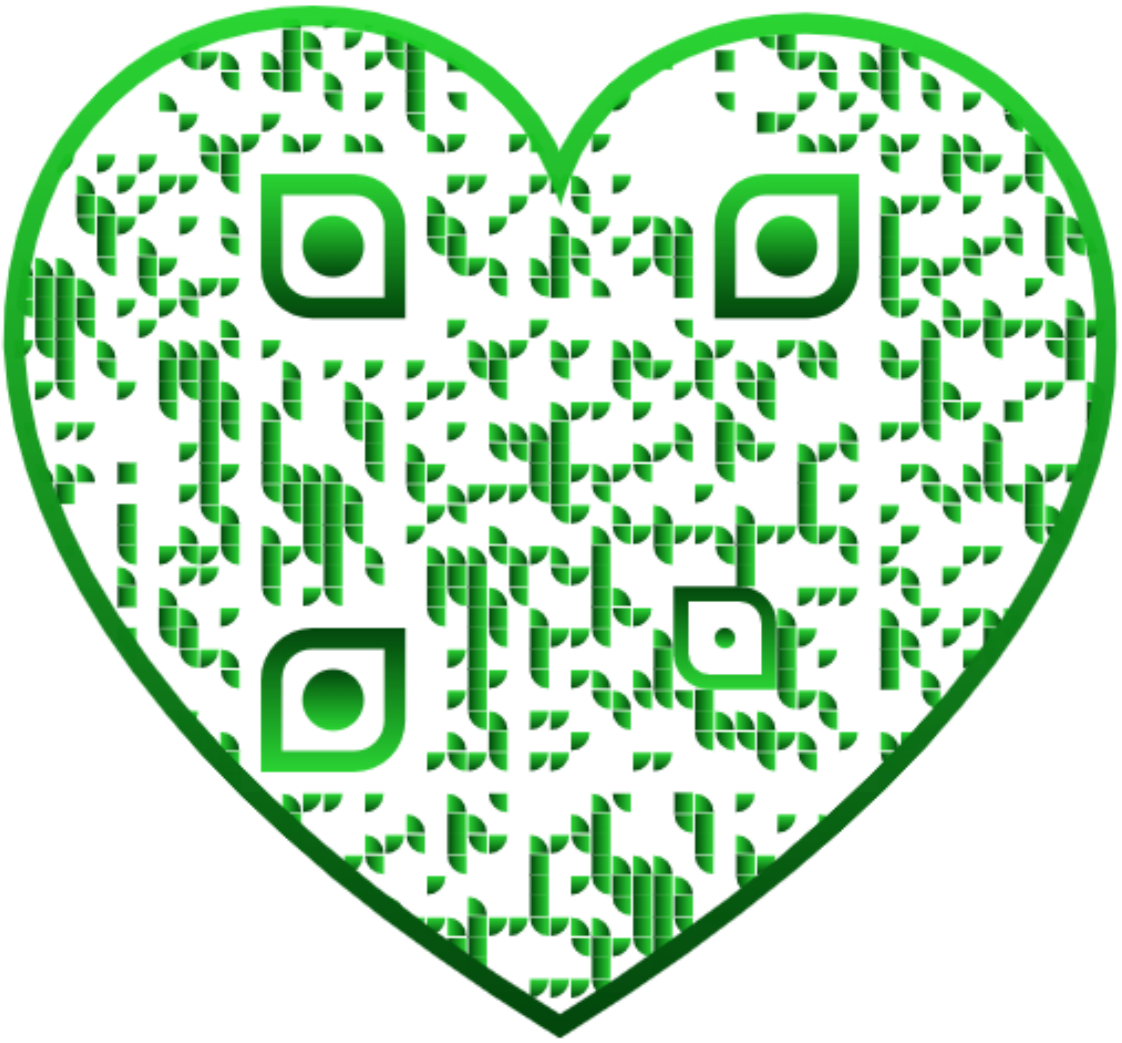

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THE CREATORS ISSUE

Our second-annual dive into creator culture spotlights the people pushing the industry forward — its innovators, troublemakers, and blot-out-the-sun megastars — and the trends shaping how we live online.

"I can make a podcast episode about whatever the fuck I want. I am free to do what feels right."

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Opening Act

Chloë Bailey Faces the Spotlight

MAKING A SOLO DEBUT wasn't easy for Chloë Bailey, but she's proud she got there. "There were so many people in my life — I'm not talking about online internet trolls, but people I was close to — who told me I couldn't do this," says the singer, 24, who brought the house down at *Rolling Stone*'s Future of Music showcase at SXSW in March, not long before she released her album, *In Pieces*. "Who said I wouldn't be good enough to do this on my own. That was scary as shit actually doing it, because there were times where I believed them. I believed the negative things being told to me. I just had to keep trusting myself." **LARISHA PAUL**

Bailey backstage at ACL Live at the Moody Theater in Austin

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Samantha Tellez** | **9**

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The Ballad of Bridget Everett

From her wild cabaret act to her intimate HBO series, the actor hits all the right notes

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Ellen Fedors**

BRIDGET EVERETT

"Sam does things I'm scared to do," Everett says of her *Somebody* character.

BRIDGET EVERETT still has restaurant stress dreams. Never mind that she is a writer, star, executive producer, and the driving force behind *Somebody Somewhere*, the critically acclaimed, cult-favorite HBO show about a directionless woman who moves back to her hometown in middle age (Season Two premieres April 23). When Everett sleeps, it's the screaming customers and missing orders from her days as a server that haunt her.

"It's really weird, because of all the things that you could have a stress dream about, producing a television show – it's so fucking stressful," she says. "But what I dream about is 'Where's my fucking food?! Where's my goddamned spicy tuna roll?!' When you're doing that for 25, 30 years, it's in the bones."

It's a rainy, cold February evening, and we're having vodka martinis and calamari at the Library bar in Manhattan's East Village, right upstairs from Joe's Pub at the Public Theater. While Everett has had roles on *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Lady Dynamite*, and in movies like *Trainwreck*, Joe's is the place where she became famous to those in the know for her bawdy, sidesplitting, slyly emotional wild ride of a cabaret show. There, she stalks the stage barefoot, cleavage spilling out of her skimpy costume, chardonnay bottle in hand, leading the crowd in original song lyrics like "What do I gotta do to get that dick in my mouth?" and promising, "Some of you may not know me, but you will not fucking forget me." Her legion of superfans includes the Broadway legend Patti LuPone, who during a recent Saturday morning phone call, dug for the perfect word to describe Everett's presence before landing on one: "Hypnotizing."

"You don't know what's going to happen," says LuPone of Everett's act. "And then whatever happens is hypnotizing."

Everett's work in *Somebody Somewhere* – a show critics have described as "subtle," "modest," and "quiet" – is equally hypnotizing, if at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. Co-created by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen (who've worked on *High Maintenance* and *Mozart in the Jungle*) and semi-based on Everett's life, it follows Sam (Everett), who returned to tiny Manhattan, Kansas, to care for her dying sister and, lacking a better plan, stayed. The role taps the side of Everett that is vulnerable, self-deprecating, lonely, and full of self-doubt – a far cry from the woman who motorboats audience members or asks them to lick whipped cream off her leg during her cabaret shows.

When *Somebody Somewhere* premiered in January 2022, Everett says, she was nervous about such an intimate show finding an audience. "I just thought, 'This show is not cool,' " she says. " 'This show doesn't have an edge. It's very simple and kind of wholesome.' And I worried that that wouldn't be enough."

Still, though the show doesn't mention the pandemic, Sam seemed to connect with viewers who had been through two intense years of loneliness and grief and were struggling to restart life. "That feeling of giving up on yourself resonates so much with me," Everett says. "And I never knew that a bunch of other people felt that same way too."

That ordinariness and humanity run through every fiber of the show, including the casting. Everett, 51, describes herself as someone who doesn't really look like anyone else on TV: "six feet tall, plus-size, with big-ass titties." She and her co-stars, mostly in their forties and fifties, all look like real-real people – not just Hollywood's version of real people. A number of them are friends Everett has known for quite some time (Mary Catherine Garrison, who plays Sam's sister Trish, was Everett's roommate for nearly 10 years), which helps explain the show's authentic vibes, says Everett: "This [show] felt very warm, because it's so many friends and nobody's famous – we're all at a similar level."

As Jeff Hiller, who plays Sam's best friend Joel, puts it, "She could have some show called *Titties!*, where she runs around shaking her boobs. And instead she creates this soft-underbelly TV show where she's raw and vulnerable and lets other people have roles that are interesting. I'm grateful to her for that, for not creating *Titties!* Though I would have watched the hell out of that."

While there is little broad, physical comedy, *Somebody* can be laugh-out-loud funny, as when uptight Trish finds herself running a lucrative side business crafting sweary throw pillows that use the word "cunt." The second episode of the new season ups the ante with two-plus minutes of graphic toilet humor that sees Sam and Joel on the phone with each other while both deal with possible food poisoning. "We've reached a new level of intimacy!" Joel cries out amid a cacophony of fart and diarrhea sound effects.

EVERETT ESSENTIALS

LOVE YOU MORE
This 2017 Amazon pilot showed what Everett could do onscreen, playing a "big girl with a big personality" who's a counselor for young adults with Down syndrome.

SEX AND THE CITY
Yes, her scene is just 14 seconds, but as Cathy, who shows up drunk to a job interview with Carrie Bradshaw, Everett might be the highlight of the film.

INSIDE AMY SCHUMER
She got to flaunt her sketch skills and her cabaret act, with taped segments of songs like "Eat It, Eat It," which is not about food.

"We might lose a few people," Everett says, "but there's a lot of other beautiful stuff that happens in the season."

Season Two also finds Sam building a better relationship with Trish and reconnecting with a former voice teacher. (Though the series is not a musical, there are several moments when Sam lets loose and viewers are treated to Everett's holy pipes.) Music holds the key to Sam's awakening – another plot point lifted from Everett's own story. She chokes up talking about the "101 million ways that music has saved my life," and how her own voice teachers "understood a part of me nobody else saw." Then she quickly cuts the heartfelt moment with a joke: "So anyway, I bawled last week after three martinis."

While we're talking, a chef swings by our table wearing a *Somebody Somewhere* ball cap. Our server is from Manhattan, Kansas, just like Everett. The team at Joe's is one part of her showbiz family, as is the audience here, which gave her a standing ovation when she announced one night in 2015 that she was booking enough work to finally leave her restaurant job.

Now, she's firmly focused on keeping her quiet little HBO series real and raw. She tucked a menopause joke into one of the new episodes, she says, adding, "If we get Season Three, we're going to have a full-blown town hall about hot flashes and dry twats."

I ask about HBO being the home of shows starring Jean Smart and Jennifer Coolidge and Molly Shannon, and whether their success – and hers – signals that TV is finally ready to center a women over 50 in shows that take place outside a retirement home or a hospital.

"It gives me hope that I might not be on the bread line after this show goes kaput," she says. "Maybe there'll be something else, and I won't have to just play, I don't know, Paul Rudd's ants in a movie." LISA TOZZI

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SXSW 2023

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MORE THAN A THOUSAND acts came to Austin in mid-March to try to win new fans at the SXSW music festival – and you could find some of the biggest, hottest names in town at ACL Live at the Moody Theater, the downtown venue where ROLLING STONE put on a four-night Future of Music showcase. (Full disclosure: ROLLING STONE's parent company, P-MRC, acquired a 50 percent stake in the SXSW festival in 2021.) It was a star-packed, genre-hopping celebration of artists who are defining the sounds of tomorrow – from major talents on the cutting edge of hip-hop, Latin pop, and reggae to loud and wild acts making their name in punk, indie pop, and more.

KOFFEE
Mikayla Simpson, a.k.a. Koffee, closed out the festivities in style. Performing songs from her debut, *Gifted*, the Jamaican star connected not just with her music, but also with her indelible charm.

REMI WOLF
"South by fuckin' Southwest!" Remi Wolf shouted on Night Three. "Are you ready to have fun?!" We were. The California singer-songwriter commanded the stage with her gently funky party starters full of left-field raps and good-natured attitude.

OTOBOKE BEAVER
The band from Osaka, Japan, turned the stage into a Roman candle of kinetic punk-rock energy and feminist fury. They climbed on monitors, screamed, strutted, ran in place, and never, ever stood still. In the crowd, dudes moshed.

SABA
The Chicago MC was a laid-back presence onstage on Night One, killing us softly with his understated verbal dexterity on tracks from last year's excellent *Few Good Things*.

BLONDSHELL
Sabrina Teitelbaum tore it down on Night Three with her stormy alt-rock, full of gut-punch emotion and big choruses. The crowd, which included local indie legend Britt Daniel, loved it.

FROM TOP: SAMANTHA TELLEZ; SALIHAH SAADIQ, 4

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MOVIES

Way of the Gunn: Inside 'Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3'

The Marvel franchise's writer-director and stars on its final chapter – and whether it's really the end

By BRIAN HIATT

OVER THE RAINBOW Saldaña as Gamora, Pratt as Star-Lord, Klementieff as Mantis, Gillan as Nebula, and Bautista as Drax (from left)

EVEN BY THE roller-coaster standards of Hollywood career arcs, the last few chapters of writer-director James Gunn's working life have been truly weird – like, talking-space-raccoon, walking-tree-level weird. In July 2018, right-wing trolls unearthed some of his old, deliberately edgy joke tweets, leading Disney to fire him from the third chapter of his Guardians of the Galaxy saga for Marvel Studios. Gunn was convinced his career was over, that he'd have to sell his house. Five years later, his *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* is on its way, and he's risen from brief unemployment and purported disgrace to showbiz mogul-dom as the newly appointed co-CEO, co-chairman, and creative guardian of Marvel's rival, Warner Bros.' DC Studios. He's writing and directing a Superman movie, due in 2025, to boot.

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3
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"When I reflect on it, it's unusual," says Gunn, who began his career at the infamous B-movie horror studio Troma. "But, you know, life is strange. Is it stranger than going from directing *Tromeo and Juliet* for Troma studios for $350,000, in which my primary job was to choreograph the sex scenes and pump blood through [a] guy's neck, to making a movie for hundreds of millions of dollars, for a giant studio, that's for all ages? I don't know. That's pretty strange, too."

FANTASY FACEOFF "My entire life is different" because of *Guardians,* says Pratt (left), with Iwuji as the High Evolutionary.

MAD GENIUS Gunn calls his career "pretty strange."

A Sneak Peek at the 'GOG Vol. 3' Soundtrack

1. Radiohead, "Creep (Acoustic Version)"
"My favorite version," Gunn says. "It's hardly been distributed."

2. Spacehog, "In the Meantime"
"There's something about Brit-pop songs that works really well in outer space."

3. The Replacements, "I Will Dare"
"They're one of my all-time favorite bands."

Within days of Disney firing Gunn in 2018, Warner Bros. pulled him into the oft-floundering DC camp to write and direct 2021's *The Suicide Squad,* which led to an excellent TV spinoff, HBO Max's John Cena-starring *Peacemaker.* At the same time, consensus grew that Disney had overreacted, and the *Guardians* cast made it clear that they were, at best, highly reluctant to make a third movie without Gunn, whose comedic skills and off-kilter sensibility had vastly extended the range and viability of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, conjuring two blockbusters out of an intergalactic-outcast saga starring characters even many hardcore Marvel fans barely knew.

"It's been a rocky road to get here," says Karen Gillan, playing against her bubbly real-life personality as the comically grim, blue-skinned, half-cyborg Nebula. "When it looked like we weren't going to make the movie without James, it just didn't feel right at all. You can't make a *Guardians* movie without James. It wouldn't be a real *Guardians* movie."

In March of 2019, Disney and Marvel Studios quietly rehired Gunn for *Guardians 3,* and he got to work revising the screenplay draft he'd turned in just before his dismissal. The cast was overjoyed, though the movie would have to wait until after he'd made *Suicide Squad.* "The only thing I ever wanted was that James would direct it," says Chris Pratt, who plays *Guardians*' lead character, Peter Quill (a.k.a. Star-Lord). "That's all I hoped for. It's a difficult landing to stick, and seeing that we had the blueprint and the right leader to get us there was a real relief."

The movie is, overall, much darker in tone than its oft-comedic predecessors. "It's matured in its emotionality the same way that probably the audience has matured," says Pratt. "The kids who loved *Guardians* were teenagers, and now they're in their mid-twenties, and it's really exciting to think that they're ready for

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JESSICA MIGLIO/©2023 MARVEL, 2; FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES

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MARTY STUART HEADS BACK TO THE 'SPIRITUAL HOME OF COUNTRY MUSIC'

How B.B. King inspired his latest—and defining—project, the Congress of Country Music.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

When Marty Stuart was growing up in Philadelphia, Miss., the Ellis Theater downtown could practically qualify as his second home. He watched the 1969 film "Johnny Cash! The Man, His World, His Music" in the old movie house, and lived to tell the Man in Black about it after joining his band in 1980.

But today, with decades of success in Nashville to his credit–first as a sideman to bluegrass legend Lester Flatt, then Cash, and finally as a bandleader in his own right–Stuart has reclaimed the 500-seat venue in the name of country music history.

The Ellis Theater is the first wing to open from the Congress of Country Music, Stuart's monument to the genre and proof of his obsession with collecting and preserving its artifacts. When it fully opens in 2024, the museum will be the repository of his 20,000-piece country music artifact collection, including Nudie suits–the decorative outfits worn during country music's golden era–plus guitars and ephemera that give insight to how country music was made.

The museum will join the state's rich roster of musical treasures like the Grammy Museum Mississippi in Cleveland, the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, and the Mississippi Arts & Entertainment Experience in Meridian. Not to mention the nearly 250 Mississippi Blues Trail and Country Music Trail markers, which together tell the story of the birthplace of American music.

The genesis of the Congress of Country Music came after Stuart visited with B.B. King at the museum he helped design before his passing in 2015. On the drive home, Stuart hatched a plan for ce- menting his hometown's status as a hub of country music, and es- tablishing a place where he could display his collection.

"It seemed to me that Tupelo was the kind of spiritual home of rock 'n' roll [because of Elvis], and B.B.'s place was the spiritual home of the blues," Stuart tells Rolling Stone. "I thought, 'I know what I need to do with my collection: Take it to Philadelphia.'"

Stuart knew his project would create a stir–he likens it to "setting a spaceship down in the middle of nowhere, expecting everybody to understand it"–but after a run of sold-out shows for the Ellis Theater's opening weekend, he's enjoying the buzz it created. "What's happening there with the Congress of Country Music has given Philadelphia a puff of wind in its sail, and it's getting on to a new chapter," he says. "To see Jontavius Willis and the Choctaw dancers, Connie Smith and Ricky Skaggs, and Vince Gill and Bill Gaither bring their music there, I just couldn't believe what I was watching. It was just awesome."

Mississippi, and your region in particular, produces some megawatt country music talent. Beyond you and Jimmie Rodgers, you've got artists like Hardy, Randy Houser and Track 45. That must make you proud.

STUART: Without question. When I first got involved in the state [in the 2000s], I noticed that the Mississippi Blues Trail markers were so pretty and cool and informative. I went to the governor at the time and said, "Can we have a country music trail?" But I noticed most of the people we were celebrating in the blues category were ghosts–friendly old ghosts that we love–and the thing I love about country music is that it's not just about the past. There's a whole lot of future in what's happening in the world of country music.

Who was the last musical artist you discovered here?

STUART: It was Chapel Hart. Somebody was telling me about these three girls from south Mississippi that were independent, doing things their way, and I went, "yeah, yeah, yeah." But I heard their song, the Dolly Parton thing, "You Can Have Him Jolene," and I thought, wait a minute, this has "smile" written all over it. I met them at the Grand Ole Opry a couple of weeks ago, and they're just as cool as their music. I was really proud for them. Proud for all of us.

Do you get to see many local musicians when you're home?

STUART: Not as much, but that's starting to evolve and change. That's one of the mission statements of the Congress of Country Music. When Old Crow Medicine Show hit with "Wagon Wheel," the next time I went to Asheville [N.C.], there was an Old Crow Medicine Show on every corner. It was the beard-and-banjo capital of the world, and you could hear music coming from backyards, street corners, inside of restaurants, bars. That's what I hope Philadelphia evolves into, that musicians from all over the planet know they can come set up camp and play music.

What's your favorite song that was inspired by Mississippi?

STUART: At the end of the nineties, I was pretty fried. I hadn't been home in 25 years. I went to stay at my grandpa's old farm–he was just a little backroads cotton farmer–and spent day after day in the pine trees in silence. One morning I was sitting at the dining room table, and I started thinking about all the prayers that have been prayed over the table, for his crops, for neighbors, World War II servicemen in the community. All of a sudden, here I was sitting at that table praying for my own soul. Just trying to hang on. And the song "Far Away" appeared at that table. The next thing I know, I'm on a Hollywood sound stage, and they're calling for an end title for a film that I was scoring called "All the Pretty Horses" (2000). I only had one song, and I played it for everybody–and that's the song. It went from my grandpa's table in Arlington, Mississippi, to Hollywood, and standing in front of the 75- or 80-piece orchestra hearing it played, it was beautiful.

Your new album, 'Altitude,' was conceived on the road. What inspired the songs?

STUART: I thought we turned the wheel pretty good and headed off into a different direction with Way Out West (2017), and on the heels of that we did a run with Roger McGuinn and Chris Hillman to celebrate the 50th anniversary of [The Byrds'] Sweetheart of the Rodeo. So me and the Fabulous Superlatives got to be The Byrds, and it was wonderful. I have no doubt in my mind that after those three tours, which were loaded with great songs, those songs and sounds followed me home. And I just got into a writing spree, and it wound up being Altitude.

After a lifetime in music, how do you stay creative?

STUART: It's always about the next song. I had a professor one time who pointed out to me that the word "art" appears in my name twice. He said, "It shouldn't take you more than a lifetime to live up to that, but I think you're on your way." But the most astounding statement he said was, "You always have to keep a creative endeavor in front of you that knows more about you than you know about it–and your job is to seek it out." And whether it's building the Congress of Country Music or writing the next song or finding the next guitar lick or playing the next town, there's always one more out there.

this movie the way that they might not have been nine years ago."

The shift kicks in right at the beginning, with a music choice. "It doesn't start with 'Mr. Blue Sky,' " says Gunn. "It doesn't start with 'Come and Get Your Love.' It starts with Radiohead's acoustic version of 'Creep.' And that's just a much different tone from the beginning than the other two films."

Pop songs have always been at the core of *Guardians*' appeal, of course, with the first two movies prominently using Seventies hits that were supposed to have been pulled from two cassette mixtapes made by Peter Quill's departed mother. For this one, the songs are pulled from a Microsoft Zune Peter got at the end of *Guardians 2,* which freed Gunn from being restricted to any particular decade – thus making the song choices much harder for the director.

"It was very, very difficult," Gunn says. "I felt very uncomfortable picking out songs and making sure that this was the right soundtrack. It was much, much harder than other movies. Do I move on to just all Eighties songs? Do I use all Nineties songs? Or do I do what a Zune would actually have – songs from different eras, which is what I ended up doing." The choices range from Bruce Springsteen's "Badlands" (which doesn't score the kind of big climactic moment you'd expect, Gunn says) to the Replacements' "I Will Dare" to Faith No More's "We Care a Lot" to the Flaming Lips' "Do You Realize??"

This is the final *Guardians* movie, at least with the current set of characters, and for Pratt, it's the end of the most important film series of his career. "My entire life is different now because of Marvel, because of the Guardians of the Galaxy," says Pratt. "It did change my life in such a way that I've been going nonstop ever since." Before *Guardians,* he was, of course, best known as the hilarious, not particularly fit, not particularly smart Andy Dwyer on *Parks and Recreation*. (Andy was married to April Ludgate, played by Aubrey Plaza, who's about to enter the MCU in her own right, on the upcoming WandaVision spinoff *Agatha: Coven of Chaos*. "That really is full circle," Pratt says.) Pratt got shredded to play Peter Quill – he associates the first film's soundtrack with the "pain" of his weight-loss regime – and began an entirely new career as an action star.

But is he done playing Star-Lord? The answer is ... convoluted, reflecting his concern about revealing anything about his character's fate in the new movie. In the MCU, he notes, "there's ways for people to come back from the dead. That being said, by saying that I don't feel like I'm done, it shouldn't go into spoiler territory. I don't want that to be like, 'Oh, well, Chris Pratt says that Peter Quill doesn't die.' That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, even if I do die in this, there's a way to bring me back. So If you're talking about like, practically, can Peter Quill come back? The answer will always be yes. Now if you're saying to me, Chris Pratt the actor, do I want to reprise my role as Peter Quill and is there mileage left in the character and do I have the bandwidth or head space for that? I do. I'd be interested in playing the character again."

Reflecting the precise dead-but-not-dead complexities he's referring to, his love interest in the previous movies, Zoe Saldaña's Gamora, is now a version from another timeline who never fell in love with him in the first place. Hilariously, one of the

trailers hints at a possible flirtation between Peter and Gillan's seemingly emotionless killer Nebula. ("I never noticed how black your eyes are," Peter tells her.) "That was a little bit of a curveball," says Gillan, who long ago built Nebula's voice on Gunn's request for a simultaneous impression of Marilyn Monroe and Clint Eastwood. "Though maybe she really harbored a secret crush this whole time. We don't know."

In *Guardians 3,* we meet Nebula in a new phase in her life, finally free from her monstrously abusive adopted dad, Thanos, the now thoroughly dead character who snapped half of the universe away in *Avengers: Infinity War.* "We're starting to see her heal a little bit and develop the personality that was maybe put on hold," says Gillan. "There's so many layers to someone who's suffered that kind of trauma." She's also eager to keep playing Nebula – but has no idea if the MCU has any place for her going forward.

PRATT FALL Nebula (Gillan) gives Peter (Pratt) a lift.

"There's a scene towards the end of the film that's somewhat of an ending-of-an-era scene. When you see it, just know that none of us are acting. Like, everyone was very emotional. It did feel like a goodbye. And it felt real."

Gunn likes to say that the *Guardians* movies have a "secret protagonist," one who's about three feet tall, sounds a lot like Bradley Cooper, and will laser-blast you if you mention his strong resemblance to a terrestrial raccoon. Among many other developments, *Guardians 3* will reveal the dark origin of Rocket (yes, voiced by Cooper), which seems to be tied into experiments conducted by one of the movie's key new characters, the High Evolutionary (Chukwudi Iwuji). For Gunn, the wounded, sarcastic, lonely Rocket is the character he relates to most, on "a very core level."

"I was always a kid that didn't quite belong in the group," he says. "I was a punk-rock kid, but I totally didn't see everything the way [punks] saw it. Rocket had his own traumas early on. And the way he learned to deal with them was kind of being tougher than leather, and mean and angry. And that came in response to the things that you learn happened to him in volume three."

As the voice of Rocket, Cooper leans into the darkness this time, Gunn says. "This is the best he's ever been. There's some stuff ... that's just chilling."

When the first *Guardians* came out in 2014, the MCU was in an expansionary mode, and possibilities seemed limitless. Now, whispers of "superhero fatigue" have grown louder than ever in the wake of the disappointments of Marvel's *Quantumania* and DC's *Shazam! Fury of the Gods*. "I think there *is* such a thing as superhero fatigue," Gunn says. "I think it doesn't have anything to do with superheroes. It has to do with the kind of stories that get to be told and if you lose your eye on the ball, which is character. We love Superman. We love Batman, we love Iron Man, because they're these incredible characters that we have in our hearts. And if it becomes just a bunch of nonsense onscreen, it gets really boring.

"But I get fatigued by most spectacle films," he continues, "by the grind of not having an emotionally grounded story. It doesn't have anything to do with whether they're superhero movies or not. If you don't have a story at the base of it, just watching things bash each other, no matter how clever those bashing moments are, no matter how clever the designs and the VFX are, it just gets fatiguing. And I think that's very, very real."

That said, Gunn never saw *Guardians* as a superhero story in the first place. "It's a space opera," he says. "A family drama." When he made the first movie, in fact, he was thinking of another Disney-owned property altogether. "I felt like movies were getting a little repetitive," he says, "and you needed a science-fiction epic that was colorful and bright, what *Star Wars* was to me when I was 11. Instead of a Chewbacca and a C-3PO, it was a talking tree and a gun-wielding raccoon. I felt like I was putting something out there that was going to work. Which doesn't mean that in the middle of shooting, I didn't wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold, sweaty panic."

For the *Guardians 3* cast – which also includes returning stars Dave Bautista as Drax, Pom Klementieff as Mantis, and Vin Diesel as the voice of Groot, along with newcomers like Will Poulter as the superpowered cosmic character Adam Warlock – the experience of completing their story after nine years was so emotional that it spilled into the finished film. "There's a scene towards the end of the film that's somewhat of an ending-of-an-era scene," says Gillan. "And everyone was crying in the scene. When you see it, just know that none of us are actually acting. Like, everyone was very emotional. It did feel like a goodbye. And it felt real."

But Gunn isn't done with the cast. He's made it clear he hopes to work with as many of them as possible in new roles at DC, and both Gillan and Pratt say they're open to that. Gunn, meanwhile, will take the lessons of *Guardians* into his new universe, and perhaps his Superman movie in particular. "I learned so much from making these movies," he says. "But it's not like Superman is going to have exactly the same vibe as a Guardians movie. It's actually quite different." That said, does his success with Rocket make him more interested in possibly taking a chance on the first live-action cinematic version of Superman's pet, Krypto the Superdog? He laughs. "I think I would have an interest in a live-action Krypto whether or not I had anything to do with Rocket," he says.

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MARKETING ROCKSTARS 2023

20 marketers shaping the creator economy

#marketingrockstars2023

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"The creator economy was worth over 100 billion by the end of 2022, with over *50 million people* identifying as creators."

Captiv8 is a minority-owned business and the only platform and creator agency of record trusted by the top Fortune 500 brands. They blend data intelligence and storytelling to put their partners at the center of creator culture, combining award-winning data scientists and creatives. This allows partners to benefit from various voices that reflect all key audiences. With its focus on data, efficiency, and scalability, Captiv8 is one of the most effective platforms for brands and creators.

The creator economy was worth over 100 billion by the end of 2022, with over 50 million people identifying as creators. Brands must embrace, understand, and work with these creators to keep up with the new marketing paradigm. Rolling Stone and Captiv8 identified the 20 marketers from various industries helping their brands tell stories in new, creator-driven ways. According to Krishna Subramanian, the CEO of Captiv8, marketers play a crucial role in driving innovation and creating monumental cultural impact in the entertainment industry, which is undergoing significant disruption as branded content and brand experiences rival those of major television and movie studios. This is just the beginning of the creator economy, and marketers need to adapt to thrive in this new landscape.

Ekta Chopra

E.L.F Beauty

As head of digital at E.L.F. beauty, Chopra champions inclusivity by collaborating with creators from diverse backgrounds. Her innovative and empathetic approach has led to the brand's success, transforming beauty standards and empowering everyone to feel beautiful.

Tariq Hassan

McDonalds

Tariq Hassan is reimagining the world's most iconic fast-food brand by collaborating with billions of McDonald's fans worldwide. He's letting creators remix brand artifacts and teaming up with artists and fashion designers to put the brand at the center of culture.

Raja Rajamannar

Mastercard

Mastercard empowers creators to follow their passions in purposeful and impactful ways, connecting artists with mentors worldwide through their Web3 artist accelerator. Rajamannar understands that creators' difficulties with getting paid and champions creation as a core part of human experience.

Todd Kaplan

Pepsi

Todd Kaplan brings Pepsi into the creator age by engaging with billions of Pepsi lovers worldwide. He understands that the best marketing ideas come from the ground up, ensuring the brand is listening and creating cultural touchstones for decades.

Samir Singh
Unilever

Unilever's Personal Care CMO, Samir Singh engages billion-strong customers in honest and inclusive ways, working with global creators to unleash the power of authenticity in brand communication.

Brieane Olson
PacSun

PacSun's Brieane Olson revived the California Cool brand's fortunes with a community-focused marketing strategy. Turning fans into creators, PacSun speaks to Gen Z on multiple levels, building lasting relationships with its brand evangelists.

Natalie Guzman
Savage x Fenty

Savage X Fenty's authentic community-building has helped the brandsoar, and Guzman has been instrumental in working with diverse, inclusive creators to support marketing campaigns. "We're proud of the community we've built," says Guzman.

Erin Chin
Logitech

Logitech's Erin Chin is a strong advocate for the creator economy, leading programs that explore how creators have transformed the music industry. "We do it with our consumers at the heart of everything we do," she says

Noel Mack
Gym Shark

Mack's secret to Gymshark's success? A pioneering creator program that centers on the people using the brand to achieve their fitness goals and inspire others. He calls the creator economy "the most exciting thing to happen to marketing and branding in a long time."

Ginny McCormick
Zappos

Zappos' Ginny McCormick puts inclusivity at the center of the brand's marketing, bringing in diverse perspectives from customers and partners alike. "All consumers are part of the creator community," she says.

Greg Fass
Liquid Death

Liquid Death's VP of Marketing, Greg Fass, creates some of the most irreverent and memorable ad campaigns by blending mischief and soul. Fass's strategy is to put entertainment first, working with creators to come up with hilariously unexpected collaborations.

Mark Weinstein
Hilton

Hilton's Mark Weinstein taps into guests' love for the brand by turning them into brand ambassadors. He also bucks trends on creator platforms, proving that being unconventional can break through the noise, like their viral 10-minute TikTok.

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MARKETING ROCKSTARS 2023

Kudzi Chikumbo

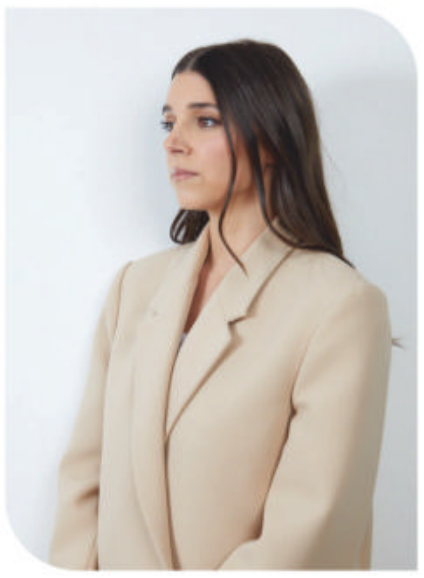
Tik Tok

Chikumbo's empathy for creators is rare at the top of the creator economy. As a former creator himself, he understands their needs and wants to make them feel seen, appreciated, empowered, and amplified. His leadership at TikTok could be a game changer for the platform.

Elizabeth Rutledge

American Express

Rutledge's support for small businesses has been integral to American Express's mission. Last year, she partnered with TikTok to give small businesses ad credits to reach Gen Z audiences, working with influencers to spread the word. Rutledge's authentic approach connects with the company's values, delivering engaging content that brings Card Member closer to their passions.



Lauren Ratner

Rhode

Ratner's marketing strategy for Rhode is unconventional and effective. Pairing a traditional debut with YouTube videos, Ratner provided an intimate look at the brand, showcasing Haley Bieber's emergence as a creator and influencer. The strategy has paid huge dividends as Rhode continues to grow.

Tim Mapes

Delta

Mapes knows that customer experience is key to retaining loyal customers, and he's turned to creators to put that experience front and center. "Creators have built trust with their highly engaged audiences," he says. Delta's dedication to its customer creators speaks volumes.

William White

Walmart

Walmart Creator empowers creators with tools and resources to inspire and track their content's performance, democratizing the company's massive retail offerings. William White knows the power of putting their creators in control, giving them the tools to create inspirational stories.

Jim Mollica

Bose

Mollica knows that sound is key to creators' work and music plays an integral part in people's lives. By using Bose's decades of expertise, he is building audio experiences for listeners worldwide, helping makers thrive.

Sean Tresvant

Taco Bell

Tresvant's marketing expertise keeps Taco Bell relevant and popular, connecting with Gen Z and the chain's loyal fanbase in authentic and irreverent ways. By partnering with the right creators, Taco Bell's marketing initiatives have achieved phenomenal results, such as the Doja Cat and Mexican Pizza campaign.

Chris Brandt

Chipotle

Chris Brandt taps viral creators for vital components of Chipotle's marketing campaigns. Focusing on building direct relationships with creators, Brandt finds opportunity in the chaos of order remixing, making them an essential part of the restaurant's menu hacks.

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Meet Gale, Latin Pop's New It Girl

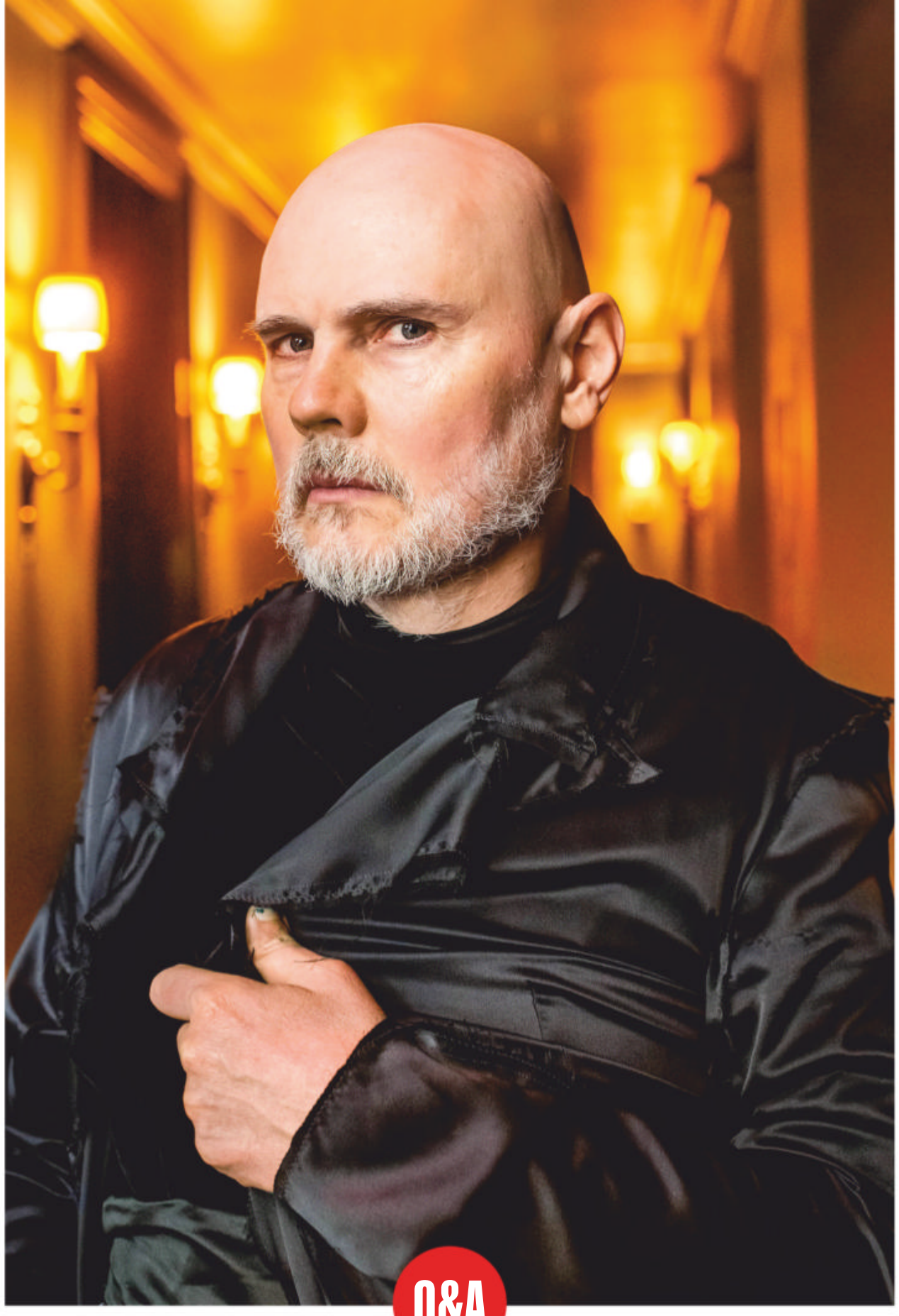
GALE IS A WHIRLWIND of energy. Within seconds of meeting her, the 30-year-old Puerto Rican singer-songwriter dives into effusive stories about where she's been traveling and what she's been listening to lately. She's happy to share some new song ideas — she'll even tell you if you have lipstick on your teeth. There's an open-book quality to Gale, who has turned heads writing for acts like Juanes and Christina Aguilera. After scoring hits and a Latin Grammy, she's ready to drop her debut album, *Lo Que No Te Dije*, this spring. It's a glowing LP that highlights her knack for pop melodies and confessional lyricism. "I love opening a portal to vulnerability," she says. "I want to be a badass bitch, but I want to be an honest, vulnerable, badass bitch." JULYSSA LOPEZ

10-SECOND BIO

HOMETOWN
Arecibo, Puerto Rico

EMOTIONS
She sees her LP as a tribute to the experiences that have brought her here: "Even the broken, sad feelings make me grateful."

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY NATALIA FERNANDEZ. STYLING BY SARAH AKIBA.
DRESS BY MDCR. JEWELRY: CASA DE FRANCESKA/AKIBA ANTIQUES.



Q&A

Billy Corgan

On the Smashing Pumpkins' new concept album, letting go of old grievances, and seeing the bright side of life

By ANDY GREENE

FEW SMASHING Pumpkins fans realized it at the time, but the group's 1995 double LP, *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness,* was the start of a loose storyline about a character known as Zero, who was reborn as Glass on 2000's *Machina/The Machines of God*. Two decades later, Billy Corgan is revisiting the whole saga on the triple album *Atum: A Rock Opera in Three Acts,* where the central figure – now known as Shiny – has been exiled in space. "For a while I thought this new album was never going to happen because the band's enthusiasm was suspect," Corgan says. "But the pandemic was a watershed moment for me. I thought, 'What's happening in the world, I have no control over. At least I control the world of Shiny and his friends.' "

You're trusting your fans to follow a pretty complex story with this album. Did you worry many of them wouldn't be able to do it?
It's actually hard-baked in there that most people won't follow the story. It doesn't really bother me, because it's the same way for *Mellon Collie* and *Machina*. Most people don't know what the records are really about. They're focused on their favorite drum solo or whatever. It's fine.

They can follow the story in a lot more detail on your new podcast.
I had a lot of people tell me that no one would listen. Well, that's fine, too.... If you went back in a time machine to me 30 years ago, I would be plagued by the idea that not every person was paying attention. Now, I'm almost pleasantly surprised that people pay attention. That's the icing on the cake.

How much new material are you going to play on the Pumpkins' summer tour?
We play about four or five new songs, which is a lot, when you think about it. I still hold out the dream that we'll be able to perform the entire album in the right setting, but we're not there yet.

A lot of your older songs reflect incredible pain and trauma from your childhood. What's it like emotionally to sing a song like "Disarm" every night?
I approach it more like an actor. Oftentimes, when I'm singing a song like "Disarm," I'll think of my children more so than myself. The song becomes a triumphant statement of someone who's not only survived, but is raising children who won't be traumatized like I was.

You said recently that the Pumpkins were a "pile of wasted opportunity" from one angle. What exactly did you mean by that?
Well, in my mind, the Nineties band separates into two eras. There's up until Jimmy [Chamberlin] leaves the band in '96, and then there's what happens afterwards, which is a month-to-month struggle of who's in, who's out, the decline of the music business, MTV going off of rock music.... When Jimmy left, I should have left. The band had in many ways outlived its usefulness, even to me personally. But we continued. It's like a family: You're not sure whether the love is there, but you carry on because that's the family that you know.

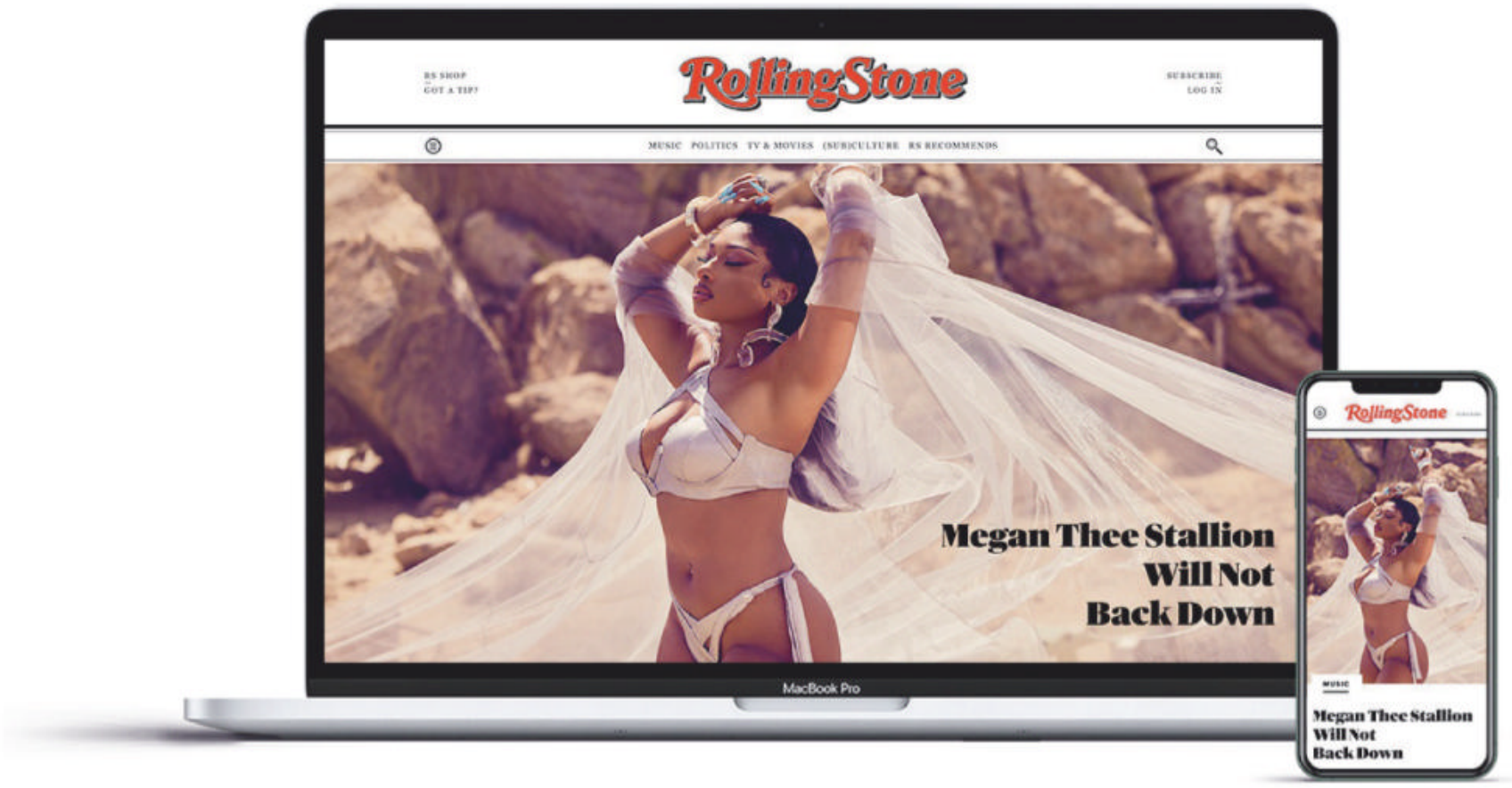
James Iha has been back in the band for five years. What's it meant for you to repair that relationship?
It allowed me to reembrace what was good about the band without having to always have some sort of qualification attached to it. Jimmy and I would go out and play a show circa 2008, and it would be about who wasn't there. We had people saying, "The band should not exist at all." And then you get into the weird math of "Wait, there's other bands out with only one person. We have two. Is that better?" James coming back ended all that.

Back in the day, you liked to stir the pot and almost make yourself into a villain. It seems like that's no longer the case.
I was never that person. I became that person in a reactionary way to the way I was presented. At some point, after having children, I just looked around and said, "I just don't want to be this guy anymore." Working in wrestling, I get it. We even had a president you could argue was one of the great villains of all time, right? [Donald Trump] loves playing that game. I reached a point of just being weary with it.

Your political views are hard to nail down. You are not firmly on either side of the left-right debate, right?
I was slow to recognize how hyperbolic the political atmosphere had become. Stuff I would say in '95 just didn't fly in 2005. And I was an old guy that was slow to realize you can't talk like that anymore.... I really, truly believe in democracy, and I believe that when everybody says what they need to say, we by and large, however slowly, get around to the good part.

On your new album, Shiny starts off having been scrubbed from history. Is that supposed to be a metaphor for cancel culture?
Not everything in the story is me, but my own part of the story is that I came along with a lot of innocence and a lot of guile, and I was very successful, but I was also targeted and bullied. I survived. I got my life together. I didn't kill myself. I've been sober for 20-something years. I could have quit years ago. I decided not to. I built a life that went beyond "the rat-in-a-cage guy." ... You reach a point in your own personal accomplishment where you go, "I'm good."

ALI SMITH/"GUARDIAN"/EYEVINE/REDUX



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RS REPORTS

Reign of Terror in Raleigh

For years, people were wrongfully arrested on drug charges. Now, they're demanding answers

By SEAN CAMPBELL

THE AFTERNOON of May 21, 2020, Yolanda Irving was relaxing in her bedroom in East Raleigh, North Carolina. The city was in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic, so her three kids milled around the apartment. Irving's teenage daughter, Cydneea, was in her room across the hall, and her 20-year-old son, Juwan, was in his wheelchair playing video games. Outside, Irving's youngest, Jalen, then 12, sat on the stoop with three teenage neighbors.

Suddenly, more than a dozen officers from the Raleigh Police Department's Vice and Selective Enforcement Unit (SEU, the department's version of SWAT) ran at the boys with riot shields and assault rifles, according to interviews and multiple lawsuits against the city of Raleigh. Thinking they were about to be shot, the boys ran inside for safety. Jalen darted into his mother's apartment with his 16-year-old neighbor Ziyel. Jalen screamed, "SWAT! SWAT! Please don't shoot! Please don't shoot!"

As a few officers burst through Irving's door, other agents pursued the two other boys, 15-year-old Ziquis and 18-year-old Dyamond, into the apartment of neighbor Kenya Walton. There, they held Ziquis, Walton's pregnant 20-year-old daughter, and her autistic 15-year-old son at rifle point. They did the same thing in Irving's apartment, even screaming at the wheelchair-bound Juwan to get on the floor.

"I kept trying to tell them that my son is handicapped, please don't shoot," Irving says. The officers didn't relent until Juwan pulled up his pants to reveal the brace on his leg, showing them that it was impossible for him to comply. Down the hall, Irving's daughter pleaded with the officers not to shoot their dog.

Walton, who was out picking up groceries for dinner, got a call from a friend that her apartment was under siege. When she arrived back home, an officer approached her with his gun drawn. He escorted her through the back door of her home.

Confused, Walton asked her kids, "What did y'all do?" She turned to the officers and repeatedly asked, "What did they do?"

The officers searched the apartments for an hour and a half for heroin. They found nothing. Kenya Walton and Yolanda Irving are drivers for special-needs children. They aren't heroin dealers. They've never even seen the drug.

Afterward, Omar Abdullah, the lead detective on the raid, briefly spoke with Irving and handed her the search warrant for her home. When Irving saw the photo for the residence attached to Abdullah's warrant, she knew immediately: He had the wrong address. And Abdullah didn't have a warrant at all for Walton's home.

As Irving screamed curses at Abdullah for tearing up the wrong home, he simply turned and walked away. The RPD didn't help her or Walton clean up, and the women say they have yet to receive an apology for the invasion.

The Vice and SEU raid was in fact meant for a man named Marcus Vanirvin, who lived a few hundred feet away in Irving's apartment complex. As their homes were searched, the women saw police arrest him for heroin trafficking when he took out the trash. Then the cops searched his home but found no drugs. The Vanirvin arrest was supposedly based on controlled buys – undercover operations in which a confidential informant is sent to purchase heroin to form the basis for drug arrests – over the two prior months, incident reports show. Vanirvin denied ever selling – or even using – heroin, and after spending more than two weeks in jail, the charges were dropped.

OMAR ABDULLAH was once considered RPD's finest. He joined the department in 2009 and was named RPD Employee of the Year for 2012. In 2017, Abdullah was in his early forties when he was promoted to detective in one of the department's Drug and Vice units. Once a detective, lawsuits allege, he terrorized the Black community in Raleigh through a series of narcotics arrests built on lies and fabricated evidence, with the help of an equally unreliable confidential informant. Nearly two dozen people are known to have been swept up in these arrests. All of his alleged victims were Black.

At least six men have had their convictions vacated after pleading guilty to drug charges in cases brought by Abdullah, and three federal civil rights lawsuits – including one stemming from the Irving and Walton raids – have been filed related to his police work.

Attorneys for one of Abdullah's alleged victims estimate in a lawsuit that from Aug. 16, 2018, through May 21, 2020 – when Abdullah was suspended following the raid on the Irving and Walton homes – the officer and an informant "conspired to make at least 29 separate controlled buys, most if not all of which involved fake drugs or real narcotics that were planted on the alleged sellers." The attorneys say that about half of these controlled buys resulted in cases that were dismissed because fake heroin was planted on people. In the case of the Irving raid, the "heroin" that was used to secure the warrant was likely brown sugar.

"It's not just Abdullah who's doing this, but there is evidence that a number of other officers either did

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SEAN CAMPBELL *is an investigative journalist focusing on social justice. This story was produced in partnership with the Garrison Project, an independent, nonpartisan organization addressing the crisis of mass incarceration and policing.*

NIGHTMARE IN THEIR OWN HOMES
Kenya Walton (left) and Yolanda Irving stand in front of the doors of their former apartments, where Raleigh cops raided their homes while executing a search warrant at the wrong address.

it or knew it was being done and did nothing about it," says prominent North Carolina civil rights attorney Bradley Bannon, who is not involved in the Raleigh lawsuits. "When there's no consequence for something, the only thing you're left with is just individual personal moral codes or consciences, and that's never been relied upon by any society I'm aware of to regulate conduct."

Specialized police units focused on narcotics and violent crime have been a fixture of modern policing since at least the 1980s, and have been notorious for violating people's constitutional rights. In Atlanta, the Red Dog Unit (an acronym for Run Every Drug Dealer Out of Georgia), formed around 1988, was known for violence – including the killing of a 92-year-old woman during a botched drug raid in 2006 – before it was retired in 2011 and later rebranded as Titan. In Baltimore, the notorious Gun Trace Task Force ran the streets until a series of indictments ranging from robbery to drug dealing brought down the unit in 2017, and pulled the Baltimore Police Department into a federally mandated overhaul due to its civil rights abuses. (This misconduct is the subject of two books as well as an HBO limited series from David Simon.) Last fall, an internal probe of a "crime suppression team" in the Washington, D.C., police force led to prosecutors dropping charges in 65 gun cases. And in January this year, five police officers in Memphis' Scorpion Unit were charged with murder for beating Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, to death after a traffic stop. The furor over Nichols' death prompted the Justice Department to launch an investigation into specialized units nationwide in March.

In Raleigh, lawsuits claim that multiple residences have been breached on faulty or fabricated evidence with no-knock or quick-knock warrants obtained in search of narcotics and executed with the aid of the SEU's paramilitary officers – the same kinds of raids that led to the deaths of Amir Locke in Minneapolis last year and Breonna Taylor in Louisville in 2020. And since 2013, at least 12 people have been killed by RPD officers, all but one of them a person of color. In mid-January, a Black man was tased to death by Raleigh cops in a parking lot after police initiated a search because they thought he might have drugs. (The six officers were placed on administrative leave. Investigations by the police department and North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation are ongoing.)

ASIDE FROM Abdullah, the other constant in each of the dismissed cases is his confidential informant, Dennis Williams, who was unhoused in 2018 and desperate for cash.

That summer, Williams was arrested by Abdullah and another RPD officer for passing off aspirin as cocaine to a confidential informant. Despite having a lengthy and violent criminal history, Williams, then 24, was recruited to be an informant himself and paid for his services. The officers nicknamed Williams "Aspirin" and set him to work scouring the city for heroin peddlers virtually unchecked, according to lawsuits.

On Feb. 28, 2020, Gregory Washington drove with his brother to pick up his friend Diontre Greene and take him to work. Greene asked to pick up Williams on the way. They met Williams outside a Food Lion supermarket in East Raleigh, and he got into the back seat. Within moments, Washington says, Williams

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Cornell Watson**

opened his door and frantically dashed across an open field near the parking lot. Washington threw his car in reverse to get away from whatever bad thing he assumed was coming his way, then heard gunfire and felt bullets hitting his car. "I'm looking at the people in my car, and they looking at me, and we all feel like we're about to die," Washington recalls.

When Washington looked up, he says, he saw three police officers pointing their guns at him. Another officer pulled Greene from the back seat by his dreadlocks and threw him to the ground. Washington got out and saw the parking lot filled with unmarked police cars. "It's looking like a movie scene," he says. The officers cuffed Washington, sat him on the curb, and then tore the speakers out of his car. "I'm looking at my brother like, 'What's going on?' "

Things clicked into place for Washington: The van driver who stared him down when he picked up Greene, the feeling that they were being followed, picking up Williams in a grocery parking lot – Williams had set them up.

Washington was taken to a satellite RPD facility in Northeast Raleigh where, he says, he was strip-searched and interrogated. There, he met Abdullah. The officer's eyes were piercing and shaky. "He kind of looked like a drug addict," Washington says. "I'm just looking like, 'What's wrong with this dude?' " Washington was charged in Wake County court with trafficking heroin and conspiracy to traffic heroin, and he spent six days in jail before posting bond with the help of friends and family. But the charges remained.

As Washington's case made its way through the court system, Greene's case was on a different and far more consequential track. He was a convicted felon, and the officers had found a gun on him, which exacerbated his trafficking charge. His case was given to then-Wake County assistant public defender Jackie Willingham. She asked Greene if he was selling heroin – there were plea deals available for people who cooperate with law enforcement. He told her he was innocent.

Willingham was given two more Abdullah cases based on evidence provided by Williams. Both clients maintained their innocence and said they didn't know where the heroin found on them had come from. Willingham notified an assistant district attorney with the Wake County DA's office that something seemed off about her three cases – they were Black men arrested by Abdullah, and their stories were oddly similar.

Willingham also looked up other Abdullah cases and called the defense attorneys assigned to them. They said their clients had all told them the same story: They didn't touch heroin. Willingham emailed a Wake County ADA about the irregularities. The ADA emailed her back, insisting that her clients were all part of the same "Blood set," meaning they were in the same gang. Not satisfied, Willingham asked a private investigator in the public defender's office, who is a former RPD Vice member, to look into her clients. The PI pulled reports, cross-referenced databases, and made some calls. He couldn't identify any current gang affiliation with the men.

On June 5, 2020, the lab results on the substance found in Greene's case, which Adbullah had claimed was heroin, came back negative for drugs. A couple of weeks later, Willingham got an email from an ADA who questioned the videos submitted as evidence for the drug purchases. By June 30, the DA's office was dismissing Willingham's Abdullah cases and a dozen others, often because the informant – Williams – was deemed unreliable.

"When there's no consequence for something, you're left with individual personal moral codes or consciences, and that's never been relied upon by any society I'm aware of to regulate conduct."

TELLING THEIR STORY
Gregory Washington (top) and Blake Banks stand where they were wrongly arrested by the Raleigh Police Department. Banks says, "It brought me to tears, man, because I thought my life was over."

Though her cases were over, Willingham wanted to warn other defense attorneys to be on the lookout for cases with Abdullah's name attached, and she wanted a notice appended to his file. So that July, she wrote a letter to the RPD and Wake County DA's office saying she was bothered by what she had uncovered, and that "there are more cases that need to be investigated."

That September, Abdullah was placed on administrative leave. The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation also launched an independent review of his cases a month later.

As investigations brewed behind the scenes, the men who'd allegedly been framed began to coalesce and look for accountability.

Shortly after the cases were dismissed in the summer of 2020, Washington reached out to a friend of his named Blake Banks, who had also been arrested by Abdullah, to see if he might be interested in filing a lawsuit.

Banks, who'd gone to high school with Williams, had been in and out of jail and prison, mostly for crimes related to selling weed. The men ran into each other once while incarcerated, but otherwise hadn't been in touch. After Banks was paroled on a gun charge in November 2018, he worked hard to rebuild his life. He got two jobs after he was released from prison, then moved on to construction, and finally transitioned to freight-truck hauling.

About a year after he was released from prison, Banks says, Williams hit him up on Facebook and asked where he could buy heroin. Banks told Williams he didn't get down with people like that, adding in a polite brushoff that he would see what he could do. But Williams kept texting about drugs, Banks says. One time, Williams said he was at the spot where they agreed to do a buy. "I said, 'Bro, I never said that I had anything for you,' " Banks remembers. Eventually, Banks stopped responding to Williams' messages.

On a late-December morning in 2019, after driving with his godmother to drop off her daughter at work, their car was swarmed by the RPD. Officers pulled Banks from the car, and handcuffed him in front of his family.

"It brought me to tears, man, because I thought my life was over," Banks says. "I thought I was really about to be guilty for something that I don't even know what I did."

According to Abdullah's incident reports, Banks had set up a heroin buy with informant Williams on Nov. 26, 2019. Abdullah wrote that on Dec. 11, 2019, he also watched Banks and another man sell heroin to Williams.

When Abdullah moved in for the arrest that day with other officers, he claimed, Banks sped off in a red Dodge Charger, and the other man simply ran away.

RECOVERING FROM THE RAID
Amir Abboud was with his then-pregnant wife and young son in their suburban Raleigh home when their door was knocked down during the execution of a search warrant intended for another person.

But Banks didn't arrange a drug buy on Dec. 11; his receipts show he was out of the state on a truck delivery. And as for the supposed sale that occurred in November, lab tests came back negative for drugs.

Banks was able to post bond with the help of family, but his relationships with them were strained. His mom thought he was back to selling; his girlfriend broke up with him. And social media was hell – his mug shot was everywhere.

For Washington's part, with the bond and legal fees resulting from his case, he owed more than $22,000 in court debt. Over the next year, he worked up to 12 hours a day between construction and driving for Lyft to dig himself out of debt.

He still suffers from intense anxiety from that day his car was shot in the supermarket parking lot with what he later learned were rubber bullets. And he's never sure what might set him off.

"I could be parked somewhere and it could be dark outside and I'll think about it," he says. "I remember the shots, how I felt at that moment.

"Bro, I don't know if you ever felt like you was about to die. That's a feeling you'll never forget."

Once Willingham's Abdullah cases were dismissed, she referred those clients to Abraham Rubert-Schewel, a civil rights attorney in Durham who got his start clerking for Jack Weinstein, then the last living member of Thurgood Marshall's legal team that prepared *Brown v. Board of Education*.

After he gathered five plaintiffs who said they were framed by Abdullah, Rubert-Schewel reviewed the state's investigation into the detective.

"It was all these people who had had large parts of their lives taken away by blatant, clear misconduct, and it was kept away in this secret file where no one could really know about it," Rubert-Schewel says.

Through depositions and discovery, he says he confirmed that at least six other officers knew that Abdullah's arrests were bogus – but didn't stop him. Abdullah's supervising sergeant, William Rolfe, provided little oversight, according to the federal civil rights lawsuits. In his deposition, Rolfe said he routinely broke with written RPD oversight policies for supervisors because that was the norm. "It was just status quo," he said in a deposition. "[T]here was nobody around saying, 'This is OK, that's OK.' You just do it. You've learned to do from your predecessors."

Four other officers told Abdullah that the heroin Williams turned in looked like brown sugar. And the lawsuits and depositions indicate they allowed arrests to occur after field tests came back negative. In a text thread among the officers, they joked about taking "'bets' on whether Aspirin would again produce 'fake heroin,'" according to a recent court filing. One of the officers did report Abdullah's pattern of false arrests to Rolfe and a supervising lieutenant. He stated in his deposition that he believed no action was taken because Abdullah is Muslim and Black, and the supervisors were afraid of being called out for discrimination. (The officers named in the lawsuits deny the allegations against them.)

Based on all the facts he had gathered, Rubert-Schewel filed a suit on April 26, 2021, on behalf of 12 people who were swept up in Abdullah's cases, including Washington and Banks. And five months later, the city reached a $2 million settlement with the plaintiffs. Williams was indicted by the Wake County DA on five counts of obstruction of justice.

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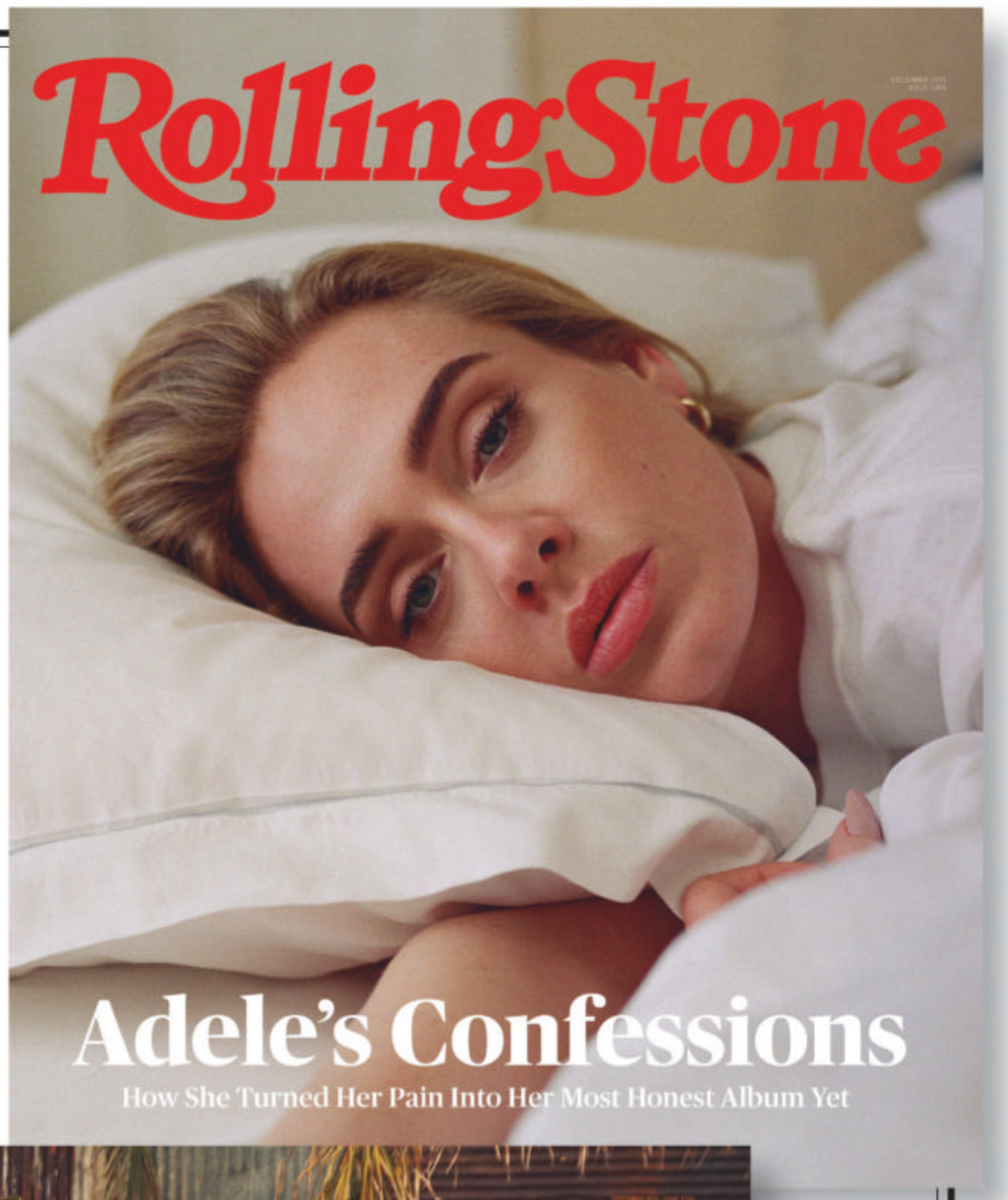
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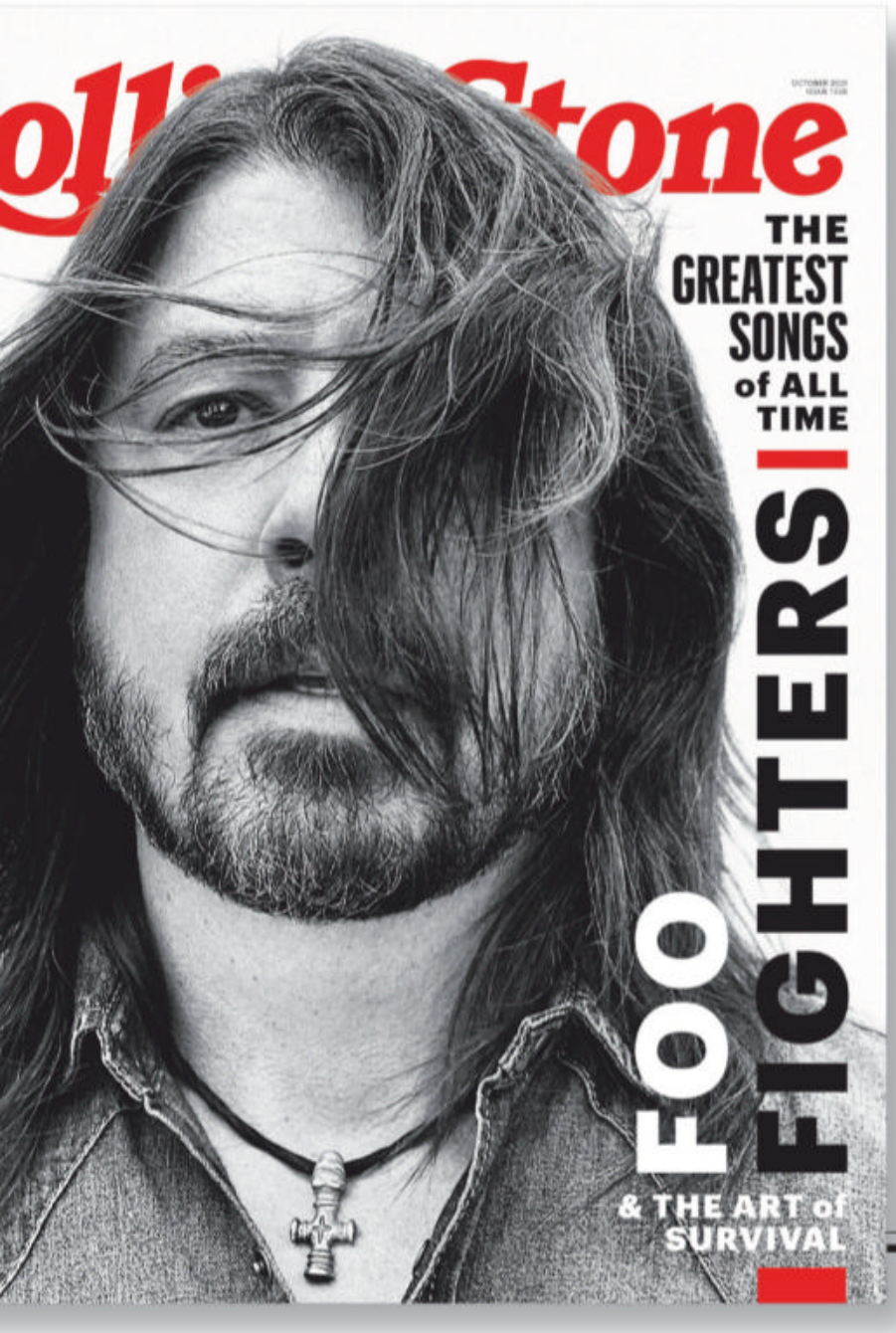
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That September, Wake County District Attorney Lorrin Freeman told The Assembly, a local nonprofit news outlet: "We do not have evidence of criminal wrongdoing by Officer Abdullah or others with the Raleigh Police Department." The RPD fired Abdullah in October 2021, more than a year after his scandal broke.

At this point, word was out that Rubert-Schewel could get results. And people who had given up on accountability from the RPD were reaching out.

People like the sister of David Weaver, who told Rubert-Schewel that her brother was wrongfully convicted on cocaine-trafficking charges by Abdullah and was serving time in prison. On Aug. 23, 2018, Abdullah had pulled Weaver in for selling nearly three grams of crack cocaine – then tried to flip him to become an informant, according to Weaver's lawsuit. Weaver didn't budge, and Abdullah strip-searched him and went through his clothes with another officer. Abdullah turned his back on Weaver and then produced a brown paper towel that contained 36 grams of crack cocaine, roughly the equivalent of 120 large crack rocks. Abdullah claimed in his incident report that he'd found it "tucked inside the subject's underwear." Weaver spent 16 months in pretrial jail and ran through multiple lawyers while maintaining his innocence. He eventually accepted a plea deal from prosecutors and was sentenced to 35-to-51 months in prison.

Rubert-Schewel was also connected with Yolanda Irving and Kenya Walton. He showed them the body-cam footage from the raid on their apartments as he built the case. Both women were overwhelmed when they saw the scene from the officers' perspective. "It was so disgusting to see five to six police officers chasing my 12-year-old down, like he was a dog," Irving says.

But Irving wasn't the only person who'd said she had her home breached by the RPD based on faulty evidence. Kesha Knight, now 43, has been disabled since 2011 from multiple strokes and needs a cane or walker for mobility. Her federal civil rights complaint states that on Feb. 12, 2020, she had just gotten out of the shower in her apartment in Northeast Raleigh and was wearing only pajama bottoms and a bra when SEU officers broke into her home. She was later hospitalized with chest pains and anxiety from the incident, and currently suffers from PTSD.

On April 7, 2021, Amir Abboud was at home in the East Raleigh suburbs when video from a home-security camera shows the RPD breaking through his door on a joint narcotics raid with the State Bureau of Investigation. All they found in his home was Abboud's then-pregnant wife and 11-month-old son playing on the living room floor. The boy cried when he saw the RPD point their rifles at him and his mother. After the officers seemed to realize they had the wrong person, they packed up their gear and left, Abboud said.

"You got pictures, you got videos, look at 'em and make sure you're doing the right thing," Abboud says. "They're getting paid by our tax money. I'm paying their salary."

The State Bureau of Investigation and RPD have denied wrongdoing in the incident. Abboud reached out to lawyers in hopes of being compensated, but no one wanted to take his case. He said he was told he'd spend more money fighting it than he would get in a settlement. He had given up on getting accountability until he saw details of Irving's home invasion while scrolling through YouTube at work.

Public records obtained by Rubert-Schewel show that the RPD Drugs and Vice Unit executed 438 search warrants between 2018 and 2021. A review of North Carolina search-warrant practices done by law professor Jeffrey Welty out of the University of North Carolina found that quick-knock warrants – warrants where officers announce themselves then break down the door, similar to no-knock warrants – seem to be standard practice in narcotics cases in North Carolina.

Earlier this year, protesters rallied for accountability from the Raleigh Police.

In February 2022, Rubert-Schewel, with his firm the Tin Fulton Walker & Owen Law Offices, and attorneys from Emancipate NC, a local legal-support and civil rights nonprofit, filed a lawsuit on behalf of Irving and Walton against the city of Raleigh, Abdullah, and the implicated officers. Weaver was released from prison in March 2022; his civil rights complaint was filed that June. Knight's complaint was filed against the city of Raleigh and the officer who obtained the warrant in her case, on Nov. 30, 2022. Abboud's claim against the State Bureau of Investigation was filed in February. Irving and Walton's lawsuit has yet to reach a settlement and is on track for a trial.

The city of Raleigh, the Raleigh Police Department, the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations, and the North Carolina Department of Justice declined to comment for this story, and District Attorney Lorrin Freeman did not respond to multiple calls, voicemails, and emails.

MORE THAN TWO YEARS after former public defender Jackie Willingham wrote her complaint about Omar Abdullah, the former officer was indicted in July 2022 by the Wake County district attorney's office on just one count of obstruction of justice. The indictment stems from the May 21, 2020, raids on Irving, Walton, and Vanirvin's apartments.

Prosecutors allege that in the Vanirvin case, Abdullah provided false statements and "falsely represented" the substance in the controlled buy leading up to the arrest. "This offense was infamous, was committed with secrecy and malice, and was done with deceit and intent to defraud," according to the indictment. Attorneys for Abdullah and Williams did not respond to requests for comment.

Abdullah turned himself in days after the indictment. He's pleaded not guilty to the charge. "He plans on vigorously defending himself in the criminal action," his defense lawyer Christian Dysart wrote in a recent court filing. In a March 16 filing in one of the civil rights lawsuits against Abdullah, his attorney wrote that "Abdullah expressly denies any allegation that he fabricated evidence." Williams has also pleaded not guilty to his charges.

This alleged deception wasn't even the impetus for stopping the scheme, in Rubert-Schewel's view. Rather, it was the apparent theft of some of the cash used in the controlled buy. Rubert-Schewel says $800 was given to Williams to buy heroin from Vanirvin, but only $60 was recovered by the RPD. "They knew what was happening, and they knew that the informant was producing fake heroin," he says of Abdullah's RPD Vice team. He laments that nearly two dozen Black people were wrongfully imprisoned, people lost jobs, parents were separated from their children, relationships were destroyed, but "no one stopped it until [Williams] stole buy money." He believes there's a good chance most of the false-arrest cases involving Abdullah and Williams have been found, but for cases where Abdullah performed his police work without Williams, there may be dozens more that could be dismissed.

Christy Lopez, a former head of civil rights litigation in the U.S. Department of Justice, who has investigated numerous police departments, including the Ferguson Police Department after the killing of Michael Brown Jr., says every case connected to Abdullah should be investigated.

"These are people's lives. They're in jail, they have criminal records because of, potentially, this guy lying. It should go back as far as the guy's been on the force," she says. "If you want to do justice, you have to be aggressive about it. You have to send a strong message: This is intolerable."

Howard Jordan, a former Oakland police chief who was an expert consultant on Rubert-Schewel's first lawsuit, believed Abdullah suffered from "hero-cop syndrome" and cut corners to make arrests. "They're in a position where they're rewarded for it," Rubert-Schewel says. "You add all that up and it creates kind of this toxic environment where, who cares if you get the wrong person's house on a raid? Who cares if you arrest a weed dealer for heroin trafficking? Because at the end of the day you got somebody off the street who probably was bad anyways." He gives a melancholic laugh at the absurdity of it and says, "It just so happened that they were wrong about it all."

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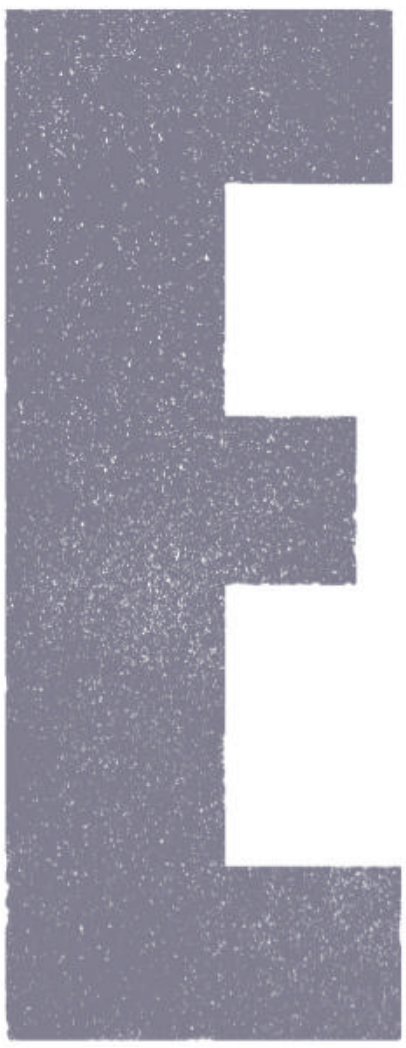
THE CREATORS ISSUE

EMMA CHAMBERLAIN

From YouTube to podcasting, she's made an art of winging it, being herself, and getting everyone to follow her lead

DOESN'T HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT

BY ALEX MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANA O'HERLIHY



EMMA CHAMBERLAIN is about to go off script. Which, to be clear, is *totally* fine with everyone here in this industrial warehouse in downtown Los Angeles on this sunny winter day. It's fine with Chamberlain's publicist. It's fine with the representatives from Spotify, who are hosting the Stream On event in which Chamberlain is about to make her appearance. It's fine with the woman who will be interviewing her, who gives off strong teleprompter vibes herself but who is apparently game to have Chamberlain just wing it. And it's *more* than fine with Spotify's top brass, who are probably well aware that Chamberlain's *Anything Goes* was the third-most-listened-to podcast on their platform in 2022, and who are therefore primed to believe that, whatever she does, she must be doing something right.

Anyway, who needs scripts? Scripts can be awkward. And inauthentic. And cringe. Scripts are not part of the Emma Chamberlain brand, nor are they particularly beloved by the real Emma Chamberlain, who, in the past six years, has gone from a floundering high school sophomore to a person with one of the fastest-growing channels on YouTube to a red-carpet icon and podcast sensation and ostensible voice of her generation. And she has done all of this by very specifically – if also somewhat accidentally – not sticking to any particular script. At a time when all those other YouTube influencers were #blessed and living their "best life," she showed up on the platform zitty and frenetic and irresistibly her awkward 16-year-old self (in one video dissecting Chamberlain's oeuvre, viewers are counseled against taking a shot every time the poster says the word "relatable"; you'd get alcohol poisoning and die). Then, after Chamberlain had racked up millions of subscribers, made millions of dollars, and redefined a genre of new media that was still in the process of defining itself – after her way of editing and of *being* on camera had grown so popular as to become the de facto norm among Gen Z – she pulled back from YouTube and pivoted primarily to podcasts, where she has evolved from a teenager exploring such mysteries as why onions make you cry to a philosophizing young woman who can riff for an hour on mortality or creativity or the meaning of life (while still managing to squeeze in references to burps and poops).

Now, she's leaning into the podcast's video format, too, which in her case does not mean glam teams and impeccable lighting. It means setting up a camera in an upstairs room of her house, sinking into the sofa in front of it, tucking a blanket over her pajama'd legs, and talking from a bullet-point outline while her cats, Declan and Frankie, occasionally wander into the frame. If she gets completely distracted by a bug sighting or the need to scratch under her armpit and narrate why, she just goes with that flow. The flow is sort of the point. The flow is just how she's wired. Content streams from her unbidden, freely, if not exactly for free.

"They gave me a script, but I don't do scripts," Chamberlain explains now, politely, to one of the many people popping in and out of her makeshift Spotify dressing room, created with curtains within the cavernous space. She has changed from the pajamas she wore on the ride over – a Beatles sweatshirt and cashmere-y pants – into a white shirt, an orange sweater vest, and a long denim skirt that seems to have an extraneous leg hole because … Oh, wait! It actually does have an extraneous leg hole. "My stylist was like, 'Do you want me to tack this down so that it looks more like a skirt?' " she explains. "I was like, 'No! I like the fact that it is confusing the masses.' " Outside her room, Swedish executives (Spotify is a Swedish company, if you didn't know) lope about, bleary with jet lag as they make the rounds of the various other curtained-off spaces to gladhand the talent. In the midst of the hubbub, Chamberlain has plopped into a chair across from the clothing rack and is holding forth with the giddiness of a theater kid backstage on opening night. When someone shares a video of their recent marriage proposal, she practically squeals with delight, then offers to direct the couple's gender-reveal video when they have a kid ("It would end up being really weird, but it would also go to Sundance on accident"). When someone else mentions that she might enjoy attending the Brilliant Minds conference – a sort of genius Burning Man, from the sounds of it – she deems the prospect "epic." Throughout all this effusion of goodwill, there are multiple check-ins about the script that she very much has not memorized and multiple assurances that, really, she doesn't need to.

"I always get nervous before I do something live," she admits to the assembled, not seeming nervous at all. "But I think if I memorize things, it does give deepfake sort of energy. I do so much better off the cuff. So I'm going to wing it. We'll see how I do." She smiles broadly. "We'll see if I pull it off."

"I GOT SICK OF WATCHING PEOPLE I ENVIED. WHAT IF I WAS SOMEONE TO BE FRIENDS WITH?"

Senior writer ALEX MORRIS *profiled Paris Hilton in the April issue.*

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HERE'S ONE THING you need to know about Emma Chamberlain: She is constantly going off script and pulling it off. She is not operating off of some master plan. Across platforms, she may have more online followers than there are people on the continent of Australia, but she does not have it all figured out yet, and if you think she might, she will be the very first one to tell you you're wrong. Or not wrong, per se – everyone is entitled to their opinions, as she'd tell you; differing viewpoints are opportunities for growth, as she'd say – but maybe not thinking clearly about how things have gone down for her and how she has navigated it all.

First of all, no one expected Chamberlain to drop out of high school at age 16, which isn't the kind of thing that's typically done in San Bruno, California, the Silicon Valley enclave where she was born in 2001 (four years before YouTube was founded above a pizzeria some eight miles away). It's also not the kind of thing that's typically done when one is a bubbly blonde, a former competitive cheerleader, and a member of the popular group at school, which Chamberlain says she was, if barely ("It never quite felt like a good fit"). Then again, that feeling of hanging on, of being the scholarship kid at a private girls school, of hearing that so-called friends who lived in mansions secretly made fun of the small apartments where she split time between her divorced parents (an artist dad and a flight-coordinator mom), well, that feeling didn't help. She'd always been an anxious kid. She'd sucked her thumb and rubbed the ear of a stuffy called Biggie Big until she was nine, until right about the time that she'd started watching YouTube every day in the era of "David After Dentist" and "Charlie Bit My Finger" and FЯED, a channel following the misadventures of a hyperactive six-year-old played by teenager Lucas Cruikshank ("The first YouTuber I loved," she says). By the end of her sophomore year, she'd been working so hard to prove herself academically – "It's like, if you're smart, it doesn't even matter how much money you have" – that she'd plunged herself into a deep depression.

You might need to be a member of Gen Z to understand what happened next, but here's what did: Chamberlain failed her driver's test, and the devastation was so total that she skipped out on even going to the last day of her sophomore year. Instead, she persuaded her dad to take her to San Francisco, where they filmed a video called "City Inspired Lookbook," in which a guileless Chamberlain frolics about in various outfits. "That's traumatic to watch," she jokes of her feelings about the video now, but she readily admits that it gave her a sense of purpose then. Over that summer, she tasked herself with putting out one video a day, a breakneck pace that, she says, motivated her to get out of bed, helped her push her depression aside, and made her quickly tire of trying to curate a perfect image online. "I started out by doing that because I didn't know what else to do," she'd told me the day before the Spotify event, over sparkling water at the Sunset Tower Hotel. "You have to start by emulating what's out there – you can't come out of the gate with a unique idea. But what happened was I got so sick of that. I grew up watching a lot of people that I envied, like, 'Oh, I envy your bedroom,' or 'I envy your makeup collection,' or I envy this, or I envy that. And I was like, 'What happens if I go the complete opposite direction? What about somebody who you don't envy, who you just want to be friends with?' "

It wasn't even that conscious at first. She'd be doing the influencer thing and would find herself internally mocking what she was doing, and then not so internally mocking it, like when she went on vacation and did the typical oh-my-God-look-at-my-gorgeous-view video, except hers was a view of a sidewalk. Or when she painted her own "Gucci" shirt, a perfect thumb in the eye of influencer-style conspicuous consumption. Famously, her first viral video was "We All Owe the Dollar Store an Apology," a full-on parody of the high-end fashion-haul vlogs of the time, in which she feigned near-apoplectic delight at *Frozen*-themed Q-tips ("What more could you ask for in a product?") and a fluffy pen ("Let me just take it out of its packaging so that you can see it in its full glory") and a scarf covered with pictures of herbs ("I learned more about herbs from this scarf than I ever have in my entire life … You're welcome").

"THERE WAS THIS PUBLIC, UNANIMOUS DECISION THAT I WAS NOW ANNOYING, CRINGE."

The video got half a million views. Chamberlain's first subscriber had been her dad. By the fall she had around 300,000 subscribers and was making a lot more than a high school allowance. If Jenna Marbles was that internet moment's prankster and Logan Paul its bad boy, Chamberlain had become its quirky and beloved ingenue.

She went back to school in the fall, but when the administration forbade her from filming on campus, she – and her parents – decided that school was the thing that should go. Barely six months after she posted the original lookbook video, the genre of anti-vlogging she'd stumbled into by just doing her thing was being emulated across YouTube: low production value, high relatability, a dash of the scatological and profane. In the Chamberlain oeuvre, outtakes are elevated, camera angles are unflattering, and she often cuts to video of herself in bed editing the main video with disdain. Rather than showing off some jet-set life, she took viewers along with her to Target or on a drive to get coffee. "I'm making an object that's so easy to cook that literally cookbooks don't even have recipes on how to cook this because it's that easy," she says in a video in which she (sort of) makes a burrito, after spending close to a full minute gagging from eating a hot pepper. Her idiosyncratic – though quickly popularized – editing style of rapid zooms and voice distortions and quick-flash text was, she says, just her way of trying to give shape and form to her own reactions. "It was basically replicating how my brain works, the way I was perceiving my footage," she explains. "So if something would stick out to me, I would zoom in a little bit. I would emphasize. Taking a day that's mundane and trying to make it interesting – that to me was an art form of my own. It was like, 'How can I edit this so that people will want to watch me doing boring shit, basically?' " Soon, videos of Chamberlain doing boring shit and just going about her ordinary teenage life were some of YouTube's most popular.

Which naturally means that the more she showed off that ordinary teenage life, and the more it resonated with people, the less ordinary it became. She moved to Los Angeles by herself at 17, and bought her first house at 18. She attended her first Paris Fashion Week and then was invited by *Vogue* to do red-carpet interviews at the 2021 Met Gala, where her first interview was with Anna Wintour ("There was a microphone issue, and I was like, 'Fuck!' I don't think she

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
OUTFIT BY **MARC JACOBS**.
JEWELRY BY **CARTIER.**

THIS SPREAD:
OUTFIT BY **BALLY.**
JEWELRY BY **CARTIER.**

"I ALWAYS SAY, 'LISTEN, I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK I'M TALKING ABOUT.' "

was very impressed, but I think I won her back"). She went from repping Hollister to partnerships with Louis Vuitton and Cartier and Lancôme. In 2020, she started her own coffee company, Chamberlain Coffee, whose main marketing point is that it is the brainchild of Emma Chamberlain. At last year's Met Gala – where her unfiltered response to Jack Harlow telling her "I love you" went viral – she found herself in the bathroom with Jenna Ortega, Billie Eilish, Kendall Jenner, and Hailey Bieber. Ortega was the only one she didn't already personally know.

Obviously, backlash to her popularity and her choices has come in waves throughout this time. "What is so special about Emma Chamberlain?" is a not uncommon Google search. Just as she was blowing up on YouTube, she says, pressing herself against the side of the Tower Bar's banquette and hunching over slightly, "there was just this public, unanimous decision that I was now annoying, cringe, all this. And I was getting hated on just for being me. Being hated in your school is one thing; you can go to a different school. Being hated on the internet is the whole fucking world. You can't go anywhere. Talk about an existential crisis when there's nowhere to hide." Sometimes she responded by putting out a video in which she read people's hate comments out loud. Sometimes she just "went into her shell," says her dad, Michael. "It was really rough. It's not like she went off the rails for a long period of time. But there have been many times when I'm like, 'You know what? I don't think this is good. There are not many people that can handle this in a way that leads to a healthy life.' "

There was also the sense that people the world over were watching and waiting for her to fuck up, which she inevitably did. A picture of her pulling back her eyes in the manner of the TikTok fox-eye trend was viewed as insensitive to Asian people. A makeover parody video, in which Chamberlain used foundation several shades too dark, was called out for appearing like blackface. This past March, a Twitter user posted an image of what seemed to be an advertisement for a "Personal Thank You Note From Emma in Instagram DM!" for $10,000 (or a payment plan of $902.58 per month), and derision swept the internet. (Her merch team quickly stepped in to say the offering had been mocked up as part of an internal test and that Chamberlain knew nothing about it.) "I've had multiple falling-outs of grace," she says now. "That's really hard for me, because if I intended to do something that was wrong or hurtful, fucking go off, tell me what's up. I'm not a perfect person. Have I fucked up? Hell yes, I've fucked up. But there were a lot of times when things that I did maybe got taken out of context, twisted into [their] own narrative. And you feel out of control of your identity. I'm being generous by saying this shit has fucked with me on a mental level in so many ways."

But honestly, it wasn't just the backlash that fucked with her, it was also the adulation. As flattered as she was by the mimicry of her video style and content, it meant that suddenly she was doing what a lot of other people were doing – except that she couldn't even do it anymore, not authentically. She wasn't in high school. Her day-to-day existence wasn't relatable, even really to her. And it seemed impossible to process the speed at which her life had completely changed and still keep up with the pace at which she was expected – by the masses if not the algorithm – to keep churning out content about it. Plus, few people had really had this type of celebrity before, a widespread fame forged outside any of the traditional channels and, initially at least, without any of the machinery or apparatus of celebrity to support it – the PR teams, the studios or record labels, the sense of how a career like hers was supposed to go. When the press came calling, she did not have the luxury of a new movie or album or book to talk about and hide behind. There was just ... her, lobbing her real thoughts and experiences out into the world on a demanding, regular schedule.

"You're so incredibly accessible to anyone at any given moment," she says of internet stardom. "It's dangerous. And everything is on a global scale, in a way." By 19, the depression that her career had first staved off was being triggered by it. "You start to feel like, 'Oh, fuck, this is getting boring,' " she says of her original anti-vlogger style. "I'm bored of this. Everyone else is getting bored of this." It was hard to figure out how to evolve and to get ahead of her own trend – hard to view her real life as more than just raw material in need of commodification. And while there are any number of ways she could have dealt with that, what she did was maybe one of the last things anyone would have expected from an erstwhile teenage YouTube celebrity: Chamberlain went deep.

IF ONE WERE, in one's mind, to craft a perfect place of quiet contemplation, monastic bliss, and midcentury mystique, one could certainly do no better than Chamberlain's home in the Los Angeles hills. Paneled skylights, exposed beams, and marble surfaces commingle to soothe the senses. Everywhere one's eyes alight feels clean, curated, organic, and Zen. After an *Architectural Digest* video tour was released last year, social media exploded with Tweets like, "Girls don't want boyfriends they want Emma Chamberlain's kitchen."

Her closet is not too shabby either, especially because it's not actually a "closet" but a whole repurposed room in which, a few hours before the Spotify event, Chamberlain can be found sitting on a puffy, striped toadstool of a seat in front of a sleek vanity as one very stylish man blow-dries and fluffs her hair and two very stylish women work on her makeup. Outside the window, light glints off the pool, and a stone waterfall tinkles. Inside, couture hangs with gallery-like precision as Chamberlain explains how she got here – "here" being not this room-size closet, but rather this current place in her mind, which unlike her surroundings, has never been, and will likely never be, a place of respite and calm.

The thing is, she's long since given up on thinking that she can will herself into a place of nirvana via some sort of relationship with millions of people she's never actually met ("When I look at myself as an online object, in a literal way, I fully, immediately, severely dissociate as a response"). She's long since abandoned the idea that money could heal her woes ("It only really matters to a certain point, and that point is much lower than you would expect; beyond that, it brings you nothing"). She's well aware that the body dysmorphia she's struggled with since she was a child will probably always be with her ("Sometimes it's a huge issue, and I'm hyper-obsessed about how I look; having to be photographed can trigger me"). And she's long since abandoned any [*Cont. on 77*]

DRESS BY **LOEWE.**
JEWELRY BY **CARTIER.**

**/ INTERNET'S BEST FRIEND **/

THE 20 MOST INFLUENTIAL CREATORS RIGHT NOW

How do you measure a creator's influence? There are endless ways to answer that. On one side is hard data, from views and subscribers to sponsorships and revenue. Then there are the intangibles, like how a creator uses their chosen platform — whether it's long-form videos, short-form vertical clips, or livestreams — to tell stories in unique and authentic ways. For *Rolling Stone*'s inaugural Most Influential list, we weighed all of these factors, then argued and debated to arrive at the 20 creators who are pushing the mediums forward — and making it impossible to turn away.

THE 21ST-CENTURY FLIRT

AMELIA DIMOLDENBERG

TIKTOK 2.9 million followers

Maybe no one has dated as many celebrities as Dimoldenberg. For nine years, the London-based journalist, 29, has been taking notables on "dates" — interviews in the city's fried-chicken restaurants, in which she awkwardly flirts and deploys her signature deadpan wit — airing them on her YouTube channel "Chicken Shop Date." What started as a bit became a sensation, attracting stars like Ed Sheeran, Daniel Kaluuya, and Shania Twain. Let's just hope she doesn't get her long-anticipated date with Drake — because she's pledged it will be her last.

THE CHANGEMAKER

DYLAN MULVANEY

TIKTOK 10.8 million followers

After losing her gig in a touring production of *The Book of Mormon* during Covid, Mulvaney, 26, took to TikTok. When she came out as trans in 2021, she used it to document her experience. Her first post in her "Days of Girlhood" series went live on March 12, 2022, drawing people in with her bubbly personality, and keeping them there with an honest look at the struggles and joys of transitioning. In the year since, she's appeared on talk shows, walked runways, and discussed trans rights at the White House, all while dodging right-wing attacks with grace.

THE BEAUTY BOSS

MONET MCMICHAEL

TIKTOK 3.1 million followers

McMichael, 23, posts simple content like GRWM videos, outfit reveals, and goofing around with her family. But her charisma — along with her dives into tough issues, like why BIPOC creators don't get as much engagement — shot up her follower counts. Since leaving Rutgers University with a nursing degree in May 2022, she's landed deals with brands like Lancôme, NARS, and MAC. Her fame is only growing: In March, her attendance at a SZA concert went viral on TikTok when other creators posted clips gushing about how excited they were to see her IRL.

FROM LEFT: CHARLOTTE HADDEN/*THE NEW YORK TIMES*/REDUX; SANDRA RIANO FOR *ROLLING STONE*; JEROD HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES

THE CASH KING

MRBEAST

YOUTUBE
140 million subscribers

Jimmy Donaldson started out on YouTube when he was 11, making videos of himself playing *Minecraft* and *Call of Duty* and guessing famous YouTubers' net worths. A little more than a decade later, he's built nothing short of a content empire, giving away millions of dollars to strangers and orchestrating over-the-top stunts on his channels. One of his most famous videos, a re-creation of the show *Squid Game,* has a mind-boggling 397 million views. Some critics have accused him of exploiting people in need — using the guise of charity to generate clicks — but his philanthropic efforts are no joke, with his foundation launching twice-monthly food and clothing drives in and around his hometown of Greenville, North Carolina.

THE CLASSROOM CLOWN

LA'RON HINES

TIKTOK 9.5 million followers

Hines' interviews of kids at his family's Mississippi day-care center all begin with the question: "Are you smart?" The answer is always yes, but the preschoolers' replies to Hines' follow-ups — anything from "Where do koalas live?" to "Who's Mona Lisa?" — are far less predictable. No matter what nonsense they come out with, Hines supports them 100 percent, and why not? You try telling an adorable little girl who defines "bankruptcy" as "that means that your clothes so soft" that she's wrong. The series has won Hines, 21, a 2022 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Social Media Personality, and landed him on the red-carpet circuit, where he challenges the likes of Big Sean and Issa Rae with his brain teasers (asked what the "e" in email stands for, Snoop Dogg replied, "Eternity"). On the side, he's working on a music career — his single "Web of Lies" dropped in December — and a Snapchat reality show, *La'Ron in a Million*.

THE CROSSOVER QUEENS

THE D'AMELIO SISTERS

TIKTOK
205.7 million followers

Charli and Dixie D'Amelio might be the closest thing TikTok has to a royal family. With 150.4 million followers, 18-year-old Charli, a competitive dancer, was one of the first major stars of the app, in late 2019. Since then, she's gone from viral fame to scoring major-brand deals (Dunkin', Hollister), walking red carpets, and winning the Mirrorball Trophy on *Dancing With the Stars*. That star material must be genetic, as Charli's older sister Dixie, 21, has built a massive following (57.3 million) on the app, too. Her focus: music. She's released several moody, introspective pop songs and opened for Big Time Rush. The sisters have also taken their act to TV, joining their parents, Heidi and Marc, to star in the reality series *The D'Amelio Show,* now renewed for its third season on Hulu.

THE CELEBRITY WHISPERER

ALEX COOPER

SPOTIFY 5 million listeners per episode

It can be hard even for seasoned interviewers to crack the ultra-polished veneer of the rich and famous. Not so for Cooper, 28. The host of the Spotify podcast *Call Her Daddy* has gotten Hailey Bieber to dish about the Selena Gomez feud rumors, Kelsea Ballerini to go deep on her divorce, and Cole Sprouse to ... smoke cigarettes and just generally behave like a douchebag — all moments that went viral, clipped and cut by fans and spread across every platform imaginable. Cooper launched the podcast in 2018 for Barstool Sports, then emerged from a highly publicized dispute with the company, and with her former co-host, Sofia Franklyn, holding a mind-boggling $60 million solo deal in 2021 — making her the highest-paid female podcast host on the platform. Though the podcast at first primarily centered on sex and relationships, it's since evolved with a much broader focus, with Cooper openly discussing such topics as trauma, feminism, and mental health with the world's biggest stars — as well as tackling thorny political subjects like abortion rights in documentary episodes.

THE SILENT MEGASTAR

KHABY LAME

TIKTOK 156 million followers

If you've ever looked askance at any overly complicated TikTok "hack," you'll find a kindred spirit in Khabane "Khaby" Lame, who's amassed more followers than any other user on the platform. Lame took off on TikTok in 2020, after he was laid off from his factory job in Chivasso, Italy. The Senegalese Italian, 23, rose to international prominence by reacting expressively — and wordlessly — to everything from botched cooking attempts to one creator's "nap tent." Though he got his start flashing his signature bored smile, his content has grown into more produced skits — while still riffing on the idea of useless tip videos. With a Hugo Boss campaign and trip to the Oscars under his belt, it's only a matter of time before Lame goes from your phone to the big screen.

THE MERRY PRANKSTER

KAI CENAT

TWITCH
4.7 million subscribers

It's hard to pin down exactly why people love this streamer so much — maybe because he does so many things, from prank videos to "just chatting" sessions to livestreaming games. While Cenat, 21, recently dethroned gaming heavyweight Ludwig as Twitch's most-subscribed creator, and won 2022 Streamer of the Year, his rise hasn't been without controversy: During his 30-day sub-a-thon in February, in which he streamed 24 hours a day, viewers claimed they saw a woman stealthily pleasuring him while on camera (he says she was merely rubbing his thigh). Yet his genuine goofiness and love of the camera keep viewers coming back.

THE GROUNDBREAKING GAMER

VALKYRAE

YOUTUBE
3.9 million subscribers

Rachell Hofstetter started her career as a video-game streamer on Twitch at 21, while working part time at GameStop, using her employee perks to grab the hottest games. Eight years later, she's still at it, despite facing relentless harassment for

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DAVE KOTINSKY/GETTY IMAGES; ANNA WEBBER/GETTY IMAGES; PHILLIP FARAONE/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF LA'RON HINES; ROBIN L MARSHALL/FILMMAGIC; GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS/REDUX; EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES; STEFANIE KEENAN/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL BUCKNER/"VARIETY"/GETTY IMAGES

being a woman in gaming. Now one of the most popular streamers in the world, she's crossed over into the mainstream, thanks to her appearances on streams with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Lil Nas X, and her cameo roles in Bella Poarch's music videos for "Build-a-Bitch" and "Inferno." She's even burnished her nerd cred by voicing a character in Netflix's cartoon series *Sonic Prime*. She's also made it clear she has entrepreneurial ambitions, becoming the first female co-owner of the gaming company 100 Thieves, alongside Drake and Scooter Braun, as well as philanthropic ones, launching a scholarship for studious gamers in the Philippines.

THE ALL-STAR ATHLETE

OLIVIA DUNNE

TIKTOK 7.3 million followers

Dunne — Livvy to her fans — is the highest-earning athlete in women's college sports. It's not necessarily because she's the most accomplished gymnast (though one look at her on the uneven bars makes our abs hurt), but because she's managed to hone her cheeky wit, body-con fashion sense, flirty lip-syncs, and incredible skill into a social media craze. That's earned the Louisiana State University student, 20, deals with companies like American Eagle Outfitters and PlantFuel. Though her content can attract negative attention from the slobbering-male set — both in comments and IRL — she posts through it, maintaining her right to flaunt hot-girl content.

THE ORIGINAL BAD BOY

LOGAN PAUL

YOUTUBE
23 million subscribers

Even people who know nothing about YouTubers have heard of Logan Paul. The erstwhile pot-stirrer of content creation along with his brother, Jake, Paul started out posting clips on the now-defunct platform Vine, dropping out of college in 2014 to become a full-time content creator. He has since sparked countless controversies over the course of his nearly decade-long career, most recently drawing the ire of animal-rights activists after a California sanctuary found his former pet pig seemingly abandoned (Paul claims he responsibly re-homed the pig a few years ago, and thanked the sanctuary for saving the pig's life). Despite all of this (or maybe because of it), his influence is undeniable: He has millions of YouTube subscribers, a blockbuster boxing and wrestling career, a line of sportswear apparel called Maverick, and *Impaulsive,* which he describes as "the world's greatest, most thought-provoking, mentally stimulating podcast in the history of mankind ... hosted by a bunch of idiots." His contract with WWE has expired, but we know he's not going anywhere.

THE HIP-HOP SIDEKICK

DRUSKI

INSTAGRAM
5.6 million followers

He's appeared in Jack Harlow and Drake videos, is on a cross-country comedy tour, played himself in the LeBron James vehicle *House Party,* and is starring alongside Chloë Bailey in the upcoming Peacock movie *Praise This*. But the Atlanta-raised stand-up, born Drew Dawit Desbordes, continues to be a presence all over social media. That's where Druski, 28, got his start in 2017, posting sketches he wrote and performed that skewered recognizable characters from his hometown, from wannabe rappers to blowhard record execs to aggro soccer moms to white frat bros. In the years since, he's become BFFs with Harlow, gained fans like 50 Cent, traveled on private jets with the Nelk Boys, sat out part of the pandemic at Odell Beckham Jr.'s Los Angeles home, and become a staple on Black Twitter. Just a few weeks ago, when he slipped down some stairs onstage and broke his ankle, a still of him midfall, with his leg buckled under and his arm flailing, became a meme in its own right. But Druski, of course, took it in stride.

THE VIRTUAL VIRTUOSO

CODEMIKO

TWITCH 926,000 followers

VTubers present themselves online via avatars, often keeping their identities hidden. But Youna Kang, 31, a former VFX animator who lost her job during the pandemic and started experimenting with social media, opens the process to fans by building virtual avatars of herself right there for her viewers to watch. Like beauty bloggers who talk frankly about nips and tucks, Kang, a.k.a. CodeMiko, shows her audience how VTubers use technology to pursue perfection. She also seems to flout Twitch's strict guidelines in order to stoke controversy, like earlier this year, when she used a shock collar on herself during a stream and got suspended. (And of course she's also experienced plenty of sexism: After unveiling CodeMiko 3.0 last year, some credited her male engineer instead of her.) Working in 3D, while most VTubers work in 2D, she shows the glitches and growing pains of building toward perfection — which is more impactful than perfection itself. Her work is tech-nerdy in the best way, as well as visually arresting — and it doesn't hurt that she's hilarious, too.

THE LEADING MAN

ADAM W

TIKTOK
19 million followers

Observational comedy skewering gender relations

THE HIMBO MOGUL

JOSH RICHARDS

TIKTOK 26 million followers

A founding member of Los Angeles' Sway House (the bro-ier version of TikTok's Hype House, which was also home to Bryce Hall and Noah Beck), 21-year-old Richards weathered some scandals during the pandemic, like hosting huge parties during the lockdown. He's since parlayed his piercing blue eyes, emotive eyebrows, and dead-on lip-syncs to take a surprising career turn as a bona fide Gen Z entrepreneur. He's formed a multimillion-dollar venture-capital fund, become chief strategy officer at TikTok competitor Triller, and co-founded his own production company with Mark Wahlberg. Alongside Brianna Chickenfry and Barstool Sports founder Dave Portnoy, he's also the co-host of the wildly popular podcast *BFFs*. Wearing multiple hats has paid off for his brand: According to *Forbes*, he's the fourth-highest earner on TikTok, notching $5 million in sponsorship deals with brands like Amazon and CashApp last year. He's even got his own line of energy drinks. Not bad for a teen from Ontario, eh?

FROM TOP: STEVEN FERDMAN/GETTY IMAGES; JESSE GRANT/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX GOODLETT/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF CODE MIKO; COURTESY OF ADAM W; JUAN PABLO RICO/SIPA USA/AP IMAGES; PHILLIP FARAONE/GETTY IMAGES

THE SCION

NORTH WEST

TIKTOK 15.5 million followers

At just nine years old, the eldest child of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West has one of the most popular accounts on TikTok. While she shares the account with her uber-famous mom, North's innate star power screams through her haphazardly edited videos — suggesting that the ability to influence might just be genetic. This proximity to celebrity paired with the snapshots of a glamorous childhood definitely helps drive her growing internet status, but it's not what makes her clips go viral. Whether North is doing her hair with her little sister, Chicago, making homemade pasta with her BFF Gracie Teefey (Selena Gomez's little sister), remaking the "Old Town Road" video, or dancing with Ice Spice in an absolutely over-the-top kitchen (think walk-in fridges and a separate room just for the frozen-yogurt machine), it's her commanding yet silly energy that makes internet gold.

and the perplexing nature of modern life is nothing new, but Adam W — the stage name of 30-year-old recent Los Angeles transplant Adam Waheed — has used platforms like YouTube and TikTok to transform it for a new era. The Egyptian American comedian got his first taste of virality in 2016, when a clip about his girlfriend getting ready for a night out while driving her car blew up. His highly produced videos, in which he often stars with other internet personalities (like former Vine star Hannah Stocking), center on relatable everyday experiences like glitchy food-delivery apps, his mom always trying to clean while he's hanging out at home, or getting friend-zoned by a date. In 2022, he was the fastest-growing comedian on YouTube (he nabbed 10 million followers in 11 months) and racked up more than 11 billion views. He's also moving into philanthropy — he just opened the second Adam Waheed School in Bali, which will serve 600 underprivileged kids.

THE SAUCY SLACKER

ELSA MAJIMBO

TIKTOK 2.4 million followers

Elsa Majimbo, a comedian from Nairobi, Kenya, is sure of two things: First, she is not interested in having visitors, and second, she definitely wants to be rich. That much was made clear in the incredibly popular TikTok clips she began posting in 2020, after moving home from school during the pandemic lockdown. Her videos — very short and low-fi, often recorded while she's in bed wearing cheap sunglasses and very audibly munching on chips — tout her curmudgeonly, anti-work ethos, as well as her cutting sense of humor. If she was trying to avoid social interactions, it may have backfired — her clips have landed her deals with Fenty, MAC, and Beats by Dre, and, y'know, millions of fans. But it's not all lying around in her misanthropic glory for Majimbo: She's a talented chess player, has released a dub-ASMR single called "Snack Queen," collaborated with luxury brand Valentino on a book called *The Alphabet for Adults and Kids,* and hosted a podcast called *Bedtime With Elsa* (where, yes, she conducted interviews from bed). Yet the persona she's created struck a DGAF chord with audiences: Majimbo loves canceling plans, she'd rather dance to the ringtone than answer her phone, and if she ever grows to regret spending all of her money, she says, she'll "weep in Louis Vuitton." May her line of merch, spouting her catchphrase — "Labor is not meant for me" — as well as a line of "unwelcome mats," keep her laughing in designer threads forever.

THE COOL BIG SISTER

TEFI

TIKTOK 1.6 million followers

TikTok star Tefi, a.k.a. Estefania Pessoa, 31, is probably best known for her deep dives centered on pivotal pop-culture drama from the past — think a 14-part breakdown of the demise of Jude Law and Sienna Miller's relationship, or a 12-part series on Nipplegate (that is, the Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake boob-exposing 2004 Super Bowl performance). But unlike accounts that post similar content, Tefi is never just adding noise to the internet buzz. Instead, she makes sure her contributions to pop-culture conversations are substantive. Recently, she turned a commentary on the *Vanderpump Rules* cheating scandal into a life lesson for her followers. (The takeaway: When people show you their true colors, believe them.) When she's not posting scripted content, Tefi's getting real on the platform — talking her fans through breakups, family woes, and young-adult dramas — with a charm and relatability that's also landed her red-carpet gigs for *InStyle,* MTV, and SXSW. Tefi isn't unique for spilling celebrity tea, but her authenticity on topics like body image and dating landed her a devoted following.

THE CHESS CHAMPS

BOTEZ SISTERS

TWITCH

1.2 million followers

Alexandra and Andrea Botez, 28 and 21, respectively, were raised in Canada and Texas, and trained in chess by their Romanian father from age six, becoming two of the most-recognized women in the male-dominated game. Fierce play and sibling chemistry have earned them more than a million followers each; they post clips of themselves playing, talking, and joking about the game — all while streaming from an L.A. content house launched by esports company Envy Gaming. Alexandra, an outspoken critic of sexism in professional chess (she liked *The Queen's Gambit* but said Anya Taylor-Joy's character would have faced far greater obstacles), recently beat reigning world champ Magnus Carlsen in a friendly match. Andrea, who also competes in the hybrid sport of chessboxing and balances her board time with extensive gym training, originated the "Botez Gambit": accidentally blundering your queen for no gain. The meme quickly entered the lexicon of chess players worldwide.

CONTRIBUTORS: EJ Dickson, Brenna Ehrlich, Elisabeth Garber-Paul, Maya Georgi, CT Jones, Miles Klee

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF KIM KARDASHIAN/INSTAGRAM; MEGA/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; FOC KAN/WIREIMAGE; COURTESY OF THE BOTEZ SISTERS; AMY SUSSMAN/WIREIMAGE; JONNY MARLOW

THE RETURN OF

BHAD BHABIE

Danielle Bregoli was thrust into the spotlight on *Dr. Phil*. Seven years later, the rapper and OnlyFans megastar is finding fame on her own terms

BY EJ DICKSON

"YOU EVER SEE somebody and you're like, 'They look crazy'?" It's 4:30 p.m., and Bhad Bhabie, a.k.a. Danielle Bregoli, is cross-legged on her massive gray velour couch in her brand-new Los Angeles home, surrounded by a three-foot-tall stuffed Pikachu and plush flower pillows.

"You ever think about *why* that person look crazy?" she says. "It's called 'sonder.' Say you're walking down the street, and you pass people, and you can imagine people's lives. You're thinking, 'What does this person want? What trauma has this person went through? Was this person ever married? Do this person got kids?' When I learned that word, I was thinking, 'Oh, shit, it makes sense.' "

Bregoli is talking about what she learned after she and her mother went on *Dr. Phil* in 2016 for a segment titled "I Want to Give Up My Car-Stealing, Knife-Wielding, Twerking 13-Year-Old Daughter Who Tried to Frame Me for a Crime!" As Bregoli boasted about her transgressions, and the audience chuckled over her youthful braggadocio, she grew defensive and yelled, "Catch me outside, how about that?" – only it came out, "Cash me ousside, how bow dah?"

The moment went massively viral, leading her to briefly become one of the most-hated people on the internet. She has since begrudgingly come to terms with her status as a meme, and how could she not? It launched her rap career, brought her millions of Instagram followers, and will drive interest in her new music – if she ever gets around to releasing it. It's also fueled a much-hyped account on the subscription-based platform OnlyFans, which she started six days after turning 18, a move that, to hear her tell it, allowed her to regain control over her image. (The fact that she made at least $70 million in the process, according to her former manager, didn't hurt either.)

But most of all, Bregoli says, she is grateful for going on *Dr. Phil,* because it has given her the gift of sonder.

"[It taught me] to not judge people," she says. "Because I was nitpicked and judged and all this awful shit. I don't look at people and say, 'They look crazy.' I look at them like, 'I wonder why they look crazy.' "

BREGOLI IS PROFOUNDLY hungover. It's a few days before her 20th birthday, and she's on her second Postmates order of the day, a turkey-and-provolone-on-rye the size of a softball. She's taking hits off a vape while draping her diminutive legs over the lap of a man who seems physiologically incapable of looking up from his phone. (When pressed about him, Bregoli's manager, Dan Roof, smirks and says they are "hanging out." Suffice to say, I can report that they were watching, and enjoying, *Cocaine Bear* before my arrival.)

Bregoli lives in her own sprawling mansion in Woodland Hills, California, surrounded by dozens of collectible Bearbrick figurines. Five years ago, she became the youngest female rap artist to debut on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, with "These Heaux." And on OnlyFans, she charges $23.99 a month for her dimly lit seminudes (for an additional fee, she'll send private DMs of, say, showertime nip slips).

Typically, creators will go into great detail describing the effort they put in. Not Bregoli. "I get new bathing suits or new lingerie and take some pictures," she says, shrugging. "I just do whatever I be feeling." As it happens, this is the attitude that Bregoli applies to virtually everything she does. After *Dr. Phil,* her viral fame attracted the interest of record execs and managers; even that, she says, was an option that was "presented to me and I was like, 'Fuck it, let's see.' " Now, she has the power to do whatever she wants – and what she wants, right now, is to do basically nothing.

"She's just living the life of a college freshman with no classes," says Roof. "[She's] binge drinking, and whatever dumb shit kids are doing. She just has a lot more money."

Bregoli did not grow up fantasizing about fame; she wanted to go into cosmetology or nursing. She was raised in Florida by Barbara Ann Bregoli, a former accountant from Brooklyn; though they speak often, Bregoli will block her mom when she they fight. "She's not, like, a little nice woman," says Bregoli. "That lady is mean as hell."

It was Barbara's idea to go on *Dr. Phil,* after Bregoli started getting into legal trouble. While it's true that Bregoli's hijinks were more serious than the average adolescent's –

BONNIE NICHOALDS

she would later plead guilty to grand theft and grand theft auto – she also says that there was much the audience did not know, mainly about her tumultuous circumstances at home. She says that contributed directly to how she acted when she was initially coming into fame.

"You know those stereotypes they put on pit bulls? Sweetest dogs ever. You could get all in their face. They're not gonna do nothing," she says, referring to the public's treatment of her after she got famous. "But imagine one of them dogs, and someone's just fucking with it, beating it up, barely feeding it. And then they put it in front of people. That's basically what happened to me."

In becoming famous, she says, she lost autonomy over her image, down to the clothes she wore in public. "My old manager seen me one time, hair in a ponytail, jeans, little hoodie, and was like, 'Yep, that's your look right there,'" she says. "That's not what I wanted." (That former manager, Adam Kluger, says this was intended in part not to sexualize her – "The way she was dressed before was, in my opinion, too revealing" – and as a branding tactic: "If you think of any popular artist, for the first year, they kept a consistent look all the time. Gaga – blond hair, bangs. Eminem, bleached blond, [white tank top]. Bhad Bhabie: red ponytail, big earrings."

"I DON'T CARE TO WORK NO MORE. I JUST WANT TO CHILL, PARTY, HANG OUT."

That lack of control extended to her first singles – frothy bops featuring her signature bratty drawl and guest spots from Lil Yachty, Kodak Black, and Lil Baby – which she didn't like then, and still make her cringe. "I hate all my early music," she says. Bregoli "can't tolerate" performing those songs, and isn't even sure she's still interested in making music. She's recorded new tracks, but finishing them is far from her priority. "I was so robbed of my childhood that I don't really care to work no more," she says. "I just want to chill, party, hang out."

After splitting with Kluger, Bregoli launched her OnlyFans in 2021. She says it was a lark meant to capitalize on her popularity. But speaking to her new manager, it's clear there was thought behind it. "The truth is, she's gotten a billion-plus views on YouTube and massive success across social media, and hadn't really reaped much of a financial reward," Roof says. "And so now you do something where you say, 'I'm going to post whatever I want to post, and I get to keep the lion's share of the money.' And I think that's a very empowering thing."

Bregoli and her team are coy about what she posts on OnlyFans – "[People are like], 'You get naked? Are you on there having sex?' Go see," she says. While there is no explicit sexual content on her main page, it's easy to see how, after half a decade of being treated as a joke, the idea of getting paid for what's essentially a cheesecake photo would be attractive. Regardless of whether she's posting feet pics or post-shower selfies, it's little work for a high return, and a way to regain her autonomy in the process.

Bregoli has been sporadically recording. In one February 2021 demo, "Baby on Fire," she drawls, "Baby ain't a baby no more/Baby done growed up." She says that's the message of her new music – but when it will drop is anybody's guess. She's got Postmates to order, *Cocaine Bear* to stream, and overpriced sculptures of Batman-themed bears to buy.

"I'm not gonna give nobody a set time on things," she says. "I might wake up one day and go into the studio and make a whole album. I might not do that for the next 10 years. I go about things how I feel.... That's why I stay to myself so much. I'm trying to learn myself." ®

FROM LEFT: CHIAKI NOZU/WIREIMAGE; TODD OWYOUNG/NBC/GETTY IMAGES; PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES; LORNE THOMSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; JASON HOWARD/BAUER-GRIFFIN/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

TIKTOK'S HOTTEST TRACKS OF 2023

Having a hit on TikTok isn't as straightforward as it was in the early days of the app. Now, a song can go viral countless ways: A single line, an artful mashup, a sped-up remix, or a creator-fueled dance challenge can all lead to a track taking off. But even then, it takes some work — or, in some cases, maybe just a little internet magic — to translate TikTok popularity into chart-topping status. Here are five artists who have managed to make it happen this year.

"ESCAPISM" / RAYE

British rising star Raye had a major breakthrough when a sped-up version of "Escapism" blew up on the app. The viral prechorus, about feeling isolated, has gone on to soundtrack all kinds of content: makeup transformations, Get Ready With Me clips, day-in-the-life compilations, classic dance videos. The song peaked at Number 22 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

"CEILINGS" / LIZZY MCALPINE

McAlpine had a taste of TikTok fame during the pandemic when a snippet of a performance she did in her bathroom spread widely. Her latest viral moment revolves around "Ceilings," a dreamy sleeper hit from her sophomore album, *Five Seconds Flat*. Fans popularized a sped-up version in wistful videos of themselves running from the camera like they're starring in their own indie romance flick.

"DIE FOR YOU" / THE WEEKND

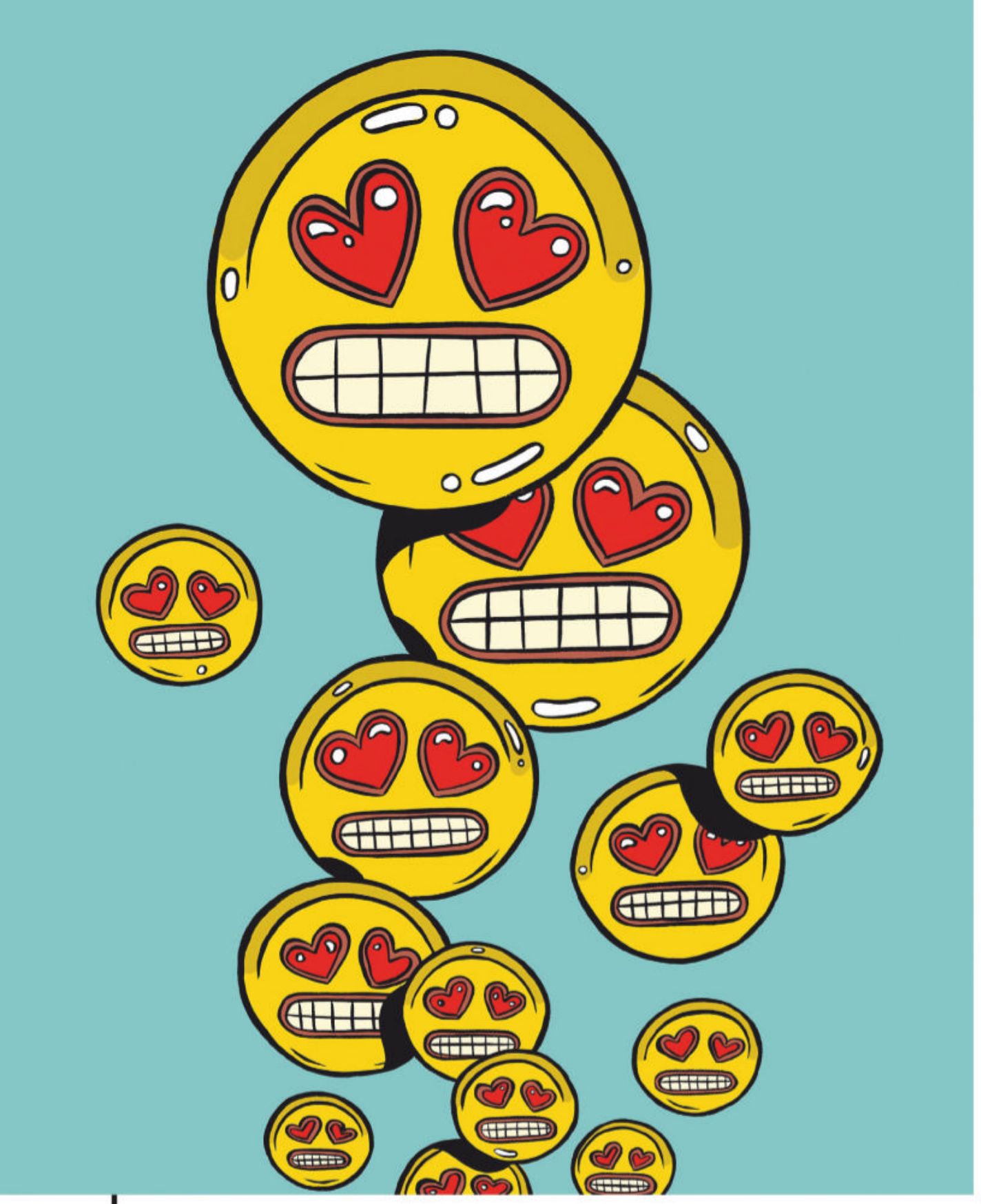
Though "Die for You" came out five years ago, it's been trending for months. (In 2022, the Lana Del Rey-assisted track "Stargirl Interlude" also got a TikTok boost.) After the song became ubiquitous on the app, the Weeknd made sure to include it on the set list of his 2022 tour. He previewed a still-unreleased remix with SZA in October 2021, and earlier this year, released an official version with Ariana Grande that soared up the charts.

"BOY'S A LIAR PT. 2" / PINKPANTHERESS FEAT. ICE SPICE

The London pop star and the buzzy New York rapper were both busy expanding their TikTok fandoms before linking up for this massive track. PinkPantheress' chirpy chorus and Ice Spice's breezy verse are favorites on the app: In addition to inspiring a mini dance challenge, the song is widely used for anime girl cosplay content, and is also a favorite of none other than North West.

"MOTHER" / MEGHAN TRAINOR

Trainor's latest single, which samples the 1954 classic, *Billboard*-chart-topping "Mr. Sandman," is a perfect case study in how to make TikTok your personal marketing tool. The singer has mastered the art of working with well-known creators — she often teams up with social media fixture Chris Olsen — and many popular TikTokers have helped make "Mother" inescapable, even kicking off a dance trend in the process. **BRITTANY SPANOS**



WELCOME TO

THE AGE OF CRINGE

For years, meme culture embraced irony and sarcasm. Now, creators have pivoted to optimism and sincerity — and they're not looking back

BY TAYLOR LORENZ

AT FIRST, THE signs were subtle. There was the "I am cringe, but I am free" meme, and the T-shirts from Gen Z e-commerce brand OGBFF emblazoned with "Too cringe for NY, too based for LA." Niche creators like Neve Pratt (awkward dad-joker) and Michael Thomas White (heartfelt himbo) began to amass cult fandoms by being authentically themselves. So-called POV TikTokers such as Devin Caherly and Emma Norton, who act out imaginary skits and were once viciously bashed by commenters, are now being embraced by the entertainment world, getting brand deals, and walking red carpets. Suddenly, the internet has become pro-cringe.

Cringe content – any video, photo, or text post that expresses a deep earnestness and sincerity – comes in many varieties. There are the overly expressive thirst traps, the awkward dance videos, the cosplay challenges, the bad lip-syncs. For much of the internet's history, "cringe" has been an insult. But now, a shift is underway. The deep nihilism that defined the internet from 2018 to 2022 has been replaced with outright optimism. And rather than shy away, Gen Z creators are embracing it – and amassing millions of fans in the process.

"At some point, people became so jaded with the hypercriticisms of the internet and all the contrarianism," says Griffin Maxwell Brooks, a 22-year-old TikTok creator with 1.2 million followers. "You have to do whatever you want. If people think you're cringey, then odds are what you're doing is of value."

Cringe didn't exactly become cool overnight. Joshua Citarella, an online-culture researcher and Twitch streamer, says that the past few years set the stage for its resurgence. "Irony is a symptom of late-capitalist nihilism, and cringe is the antidote to that," he says. After the positivity on the internet throughout social media's early years, many young people became deeply detached during the Trump era. Pessimism reigned in meme culture, and YouTubers amassed millions of followers by mocking creators who committed the cardinal sin of being too earnest or embarrassing online.

Then, the pandemic hit, and suddenly everyone was pushed online. Many young people turned to apps like TikTok for entertainment, and soon began posting themselves. While they previously may have been afraid to be vulnerable on the internet, lest they be mocked at school, when classes moved online they finally felt free to express their true selves and build community around the things they actually cared about.

"Quarantine was a pivotal moment," says Brooklynne Webb, an 18-year-old TikTok star with 10.6 million followers who rose to fame posting POV videos deemed by many to be cringe for their over-the-top expressiveness. "Once I realized I wasn't going to be seeing these people [from school] in person, it let me be able to let loose and post this more-silly content." When the world began opening back up, many creators never looked back.

Kareem Rahma, a content creator and comedian in New York who developed and hosts a TikTok show called "Keep the Meter Running" – where he conducts Anthony Bourdain-style interviews with cab drivers, asking them about their life stories, why they work so hard, and how they find happiness – credits his success to leaning into sincerity. "I think the cringe movement is doing whatever the fuck you want and not caring what people think," he says. "Am I cringey? Yes. Do I care? Absolutely not."

Rahma says that as a millennial, he spent years producing content for an internet saturated with irony. "It was not cool to have beliefs or feel strongly about anything," he says. "It was a general environment of hopelessness that people adopted as a way of insulating or protecting themselves from the possibility of failure. When everyone is ironic and an edgelord, it loses its edge." Now, he adds, "to see people who really do enjoy things and make themselves vulnerable is a really radical thing."

While content creators have led the charge, many in broader Gen Z are embracing this optimism. Ethan Kring, 23, founded Here, a cause-based media and events company in Los Angeles that helps members of Gen Z get involved

GUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

ILLUSTRATION BY **KELSEY DAKE**

with nonprofits related to issues they care about. He says that the simple idea of caring about things is hugely resonant right now among his peers.

"Our phones are constantly bombarding us with potential global catastrophes. Cringe creates a bridge that allows us to feel less alone," he says. "It's a universal language, like laughter, a way for us to invite people in rather than exclude people. It's like, 'Why choose to be separate in this universal suffering, when we can connect with people off the idea that we're all cringe?' "

Many young people are also reevaluating what once constituted cringe, attributing use of the term to unacknowledged bigotry more than just a rejection of sincerity. Some niche communities, such as furries, anime fans, and fetish groups, who were once mocked on social media, have since amassed cultural power that has launched them into the mainstream.

"I felt like what people called cringe was anything not conforming to social norms," says Brooks, who uses gender-neutral pronouns. Now, they embrace their outgoing personality and creative fashion choices, such as wearing a headlamp as an accessory. "It made me connect the dots between homophobia, transphobia, and the word 'cringe.' [Now], I weaponize my own embarrassment to make people feel more comfortable wearing whatever they want."

"THERE'S SO MUCH NEGATIVITY IN THE WORLD, IT'S LIKE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR."

Leia Jospé, a videographer for HBO's *How to With John Wilson,* has been dubbed the internet's leading "curator of cringe" for her Instagram account where she compiles the best of the genre. "There's so much negativity in the world, it feels like a breath of fresh air," she says. "I think earnestness is pretty brave, and it takes a lot of guts to put yourself out there. I'm a millennial and I feel like my generation is obsessed with self-awareness, and a lot of things keep us from doing things we love. Whereas Gen Z is on this post-cringe thing – they know they're cringe but don't care."

It doesn't hurt that, with this shift, cringe content has begun to perform incredibly well. Videos including the hashtag #cringe have amassed more than 40.5 billion collective views on TikTok. "You can see this shift of people that are earnest on TikTok are doing really well," says Jospé. "They get a lot of interactions. They're hitting a nerve with a bunch of other young people."

When Webb, the POV TikToker, released a pop song last year titled "My Crown," she purposefully overexaggerated her facial expressions in her music video and leaned hard into sincerity. It paid off, and the song became a hit on TikTok and Spotify. "It was meant to be cringey, to get people talking," she says.

With the cultural shift, being overly heartfelt has become a very effective way to build an audience and monetize. "Being a little bit more cringey and out of the norm is what grabs people's attention," says Webb. "I noticed my social media probably doing the worst in terms of numbers when I was taking it far too seriously. When I was just having fun and being silly, that's when I saw my content doing better."

Jack Corbett, 25, a TikTok creator who makes videos for NPR's *Planet Money,* says he wouldn't have seen a fraction of the success he's had without embracing cringe. "It's just so lame to see people ripping on weird people out there being themselves," he says. "There was a good tweet I saw that said, 'Don't kill a part of you that's cringe, kill the part of you that cringes.' "

© MADISON LANE

HOW ALIX EARLE BECAME

TIKTOK'S IT GIRL

The University of Miami senior turned makeup tutorials and her messy room into gold

AS THE blond, willowy daughter of a New Jersey construction magnate, Alix Earle, 22, doesn't seem like an everywoman on the surface. Yet, since her TikTok debut in early 2020, viewers have flocked to the University of Miami senior, who's opened up during her Get Ready With Me videos about everything from her cystic acne to her anxiety to her messy house to her former relationship with MLB player Tyler Wade. Earle has achieved It-girl status, landing splashy brand deals (Tarte, Rare Beauty, GrubHub) and collaborating with A-listers like Selena Gomez. Products Earle recommends sell out so fast that it's been called "the Alix Earle effect." Here, she schools the masses on how to become a TikTok superstar.

PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

When she started posting on TikTok, Earle didn't quite know what would resonate with her audience. "I tried a lot of the TikTok dances," she says. "I quickly learned that wasn't for me." It wasn't until she made a video showing her acne before and after makeup that people in her comments started clamoring for her makeup routine and she figured out her niche.

LEARN FROM YOUR PEERS

Though Earle is now known for her ease with cosmetics, that wasn't always the case. "Growing up I saw my mom doing her makeup, but I definitely had some scary makeup days," says the influencer, citing the times she piled on orange-hued bronzer. "Looking back on old photos, I was like, 'What was I thinking?' " But with trial and error — and a little help from other creators — she was able to hone her skills. "TikTok came around, obviously you're seeing a bunch of people do their makeup, and I was exposed to a lot more products and techniques. So TikTok has definitely evolved my game."

HAVE THICK SKIN

Since ascending to fame, Earle has seen various rumors and critiques circulate about herself, such as that she's dating Kendall Jenner's ex Devin Booker (she's never met him) or that she's glorifying depression by showcasing her unkempt dorm room. She quickly learned to ignore it. "When I was younger, I used to let a lot of things get to me," she says. "I have never really taken anything on social media too seriously. My friends always say, 'You're perfect for this. I couldn't handle it.' Because I just don't care."

KEEP IT REAL

Earle credits her massive audience in part to the fact that she's open about the cosmetic work she's had done, regularly posting about Botox and fillers and her breast-enhancement surgery. "Growing up, I saw a lot of perfection on social media, and would compare myself to it, a lot. And as I got older, I realized that that's not real," she says. "Not that getting plastic surgery is great, but people should know that this is what people are having done, and this is not how people are naturally looking."

USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT

As a marketing major, Earle says she has unique insight into how to grow an audience, and regularly uses what she's learned in the classroom to build her brand. "When sounds are trending, it's easy for everyone to do the voice-over, and do the sound or do the dance," she says. "But I think when you're using your own voice and your own thoughts or whatever story you're telling, that's obviously just original to you. So it's not going to be saturated by everyone else following the trend, because it's your experience." **EJ DICKSON**

THE EXISTENTIAL HILLBILLY

Theo Von espouses his opinions on life, love, and politics. Just don't quote him on any of it

BY ALISON ABBEY

"I WISH WE could talk about race more," says Theo Von. "I feel like, especially as a white male, to raise your hands to ask a question is like you're that nervous kid in the back of the class."

This hot take – it's hard out there for a white guy – is the sort of musing Von is known for. But before you think you've got him deciphered (see the many Reddit threads like "Theo Von is a right wing nut job"), he wants you to hear him out: "I understand that, in other points of time, [other] people couldn't raise their hand. But that doesn't mean that people don't have certain feelings about it."

The 43-year-old comedian and host of the podcast *This Past Weekend* is tucked into a table at a coffee shop in Nashville, surrounded by students from a nearby college. Von moved to this quiet corner of Music City in 2020 when he, like so many, made the trek from Los Angeles for a change of scenery (and lower property taxes).

With his disarming, deep-in-the-bayou accent and rusty mullet, it's hard to tell when Von is being controversial or just conversational, but that duality has earned him 5 million monthly podcast listeners and roughly 10 million social media followers. His podcast, like his stand-up, usually flows in stream-of-consciousness. Whether he's diving into his own addiction issues or third-rail topics like white privilege, Von weaves yarns like a beloved but nutty cousin imparting questionable wisdom over Thanksgiving dinner. Take this punchline from the 2016 Netflix special *No Offense,* where he describes getting pulled from camp in 1994 to help police look for primates that escaped from a local testing facility: "Until you and six kids you barely know in wet bathing suits have surrounded nine chimpanzees outside of a Wendy's, you probably really don't know yourself."

It's the type of humor Von, born Theodor Capitani von Kurnatowski III, used to deal with his childhood in Louisiana. "One of the only times I felt comfortable was when people were laughing," he says. "I didn't grow up with much, so the only thing I felt like I did have was my voice."

Von moved to Los Angeles in his early twenties, but after 14 years, his career was stagnant. He tried his hand at reality TV, appearing on *Road Rules, The Challenge,* and *Last Comic Standing,* but, he says, Hollywood didn't understand him. "I'm Polish-Nicaraguan, but they lump anyone who sounds like me into this 'We already know who you are,' " he says. "You don't know who I am, and with that attitude, I'm not going to give any more of myself to you."

He decided to show the world who he was. In 2016, Von, who'd already dabbled in podcasts, produced, edited, and uploaded videos for what became *This Past Weekend,* rooted in folksy storytelling and interviews. A 2017 appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience* helped shape his approach. "I walked out, and I felt inspired. I was like, 'I just need to talk about myself. I just need to *be* myself,' " Von says.

Social media has also been a boon for Von, if a mixed blessing. He recently reached 2 billion views on TikTok, yet more than half of those clips were edited and shared by fan accounts. While Von appreciates the dedication, he struggles with losing ownership of his work. "It's amazing and it's scary because you don't have control. I'm grateful for it, but at the same time, it's very lawless in that world. People can make whatever they want."

See, again, those Reddit threads. "We've created an environment where one thing that gets out there can make it so that that's all you are," he says. When he hosted Tomi Lahren in 2020, fans took to the comment section to claim he is right-wing. After an appearance by Jesse Ventura in 2021, many listeners argued otherwise.

The comedian didn't sign up to be anyone's hero – but that's not to say he doesn't value his fans. He's even developed a personal relationship with some, encouraging listeners to reach out to him. "I've always craved authenticity," he says. "A lot of people call into the show to share something serious that's going on with them. I like real."

Through it all, his platform keeps growing. He's booking new podcast guests (he's presently gearing up for Roseanne Barr); selling out cities around the globe on his stand-up tour; and making plans for a return to Hollywood – he just finished a screenplay with David Spade.

Von finishes his coffee and poses another hot take: "What if one day they swapped a man and a woman's brains and they were exactly the fucking same?" he asks. "What if it's all just a perception issue?" He's laughing as he asks it, but he's completely sincere. As he heads for the door, one of those coffee-shop college kids stops him. Von shakes his hand, thanks him for his support, and the kid walks away glowing – like he just met his hero.

PAMELA SISSON

HOW CREATORS

MAKE CASH

In the early days of social media, people scoffed at the idea that posting content could be a way to make a living. Today, the creator economy has exploded, with YouTube, TikTok, and OnlyFans stars earning as much money as bankers, doctors, and lawyers. "[The industry] is at the point where there are more road maps, there's more credibility," says Samir Chaudry, one half of Colin and Samir, whose YouTube channel features creators going deep on their craft. "It's an honest, real career." So how, exactly, does it work? Chaudry and his partner, Colin Rosenblum, break it down. ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

	ADVERTISING	SPONSORSHIPS	SUBSCRIPTIONS	PRODUCTS	CATALOGS
Who It's For	To join a platform's "partnership program," which allows it to play ads against your content, you'll need an established channel — on YouTube, that's at least 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours of content viewed in the past 12 months.	While it's a no-brainer for a creator with a niche audience (say, a culinary influencer pairing with a cookware company), sponsorship is good for anyone because it guarantees income and proves brands are willing to pay for your work.	Creators with a dedicated following. Chaudry compares its growing success to the unbundling happening in streaming: "We pay for HBO to watch *Succession*. We pay for Apple TV+ to watch *Ted Lasso*. We're seeing audiences are willing to pay."	A mid- to high-level creator with devoted fans and a product that's natural for them to promote. "Emma Chamberlain was drinking coffee in every vlog," says Chaudry. "When you swap [in] Chamberlain Coffee, the content has not changed."	Creators (YouTubers, primarily) who have a large library of public content that they've built over their career — and that they're willing to part with for cash. Dude Perfect and Donut Media are two of the bigger names to strike these deals.
How It Works	Ads run before, during, or after content. The platform handles the negotiation with advertisers — what content their ads will run next to, how much money they'll pay, etc. The creator simply gets a check at the end of the month.	Brands find a creator who is known and respected among their target demographic, and pay them for a certain number of videos or posts. For an influencer with around 100,000 followers, that might be a couple thousand dollars per post.	Fans follow their favorite creators to platforms like Substack, Patreon, or OnlyFans and pay a monthly fee to unlock content. Each platform has a slightly different setup and will generally take a fee, anywhere from five to 50 percent.	To do this right, you've got to approach an established brand and harness its infrastructure, or poach C-suite execs who know what they're doing. MrBeast, for example, hired a former president of a protein-bar brand to run his snack line Feastables.	YouTubers sell the advertising rights of their previous videos to a company, and the company delivers a check to invest in their business. Colin and Samir point to their sponsor Spotter, which right now is the leading company focused on catalogs.
Pros	Because the platform handles the client, you won't have to sit through pitch meetings with advertisers, take any feedback from them, or be bound by their sensibilities. And if you're getting a lot of views, "the money just rolls in," Chaudry says.	If the partnership makes sense, product integration can be seamless. "When [a creator] has a natural, fitting sponsorship, it feels like a part of the video I want to watch, not one I want to skip," says Chaudry. Recurring deals can provide financial stability.	Income security. "If you have 1,000 subscribers paying you $10 a month, you can make a good living, and if one subscriber cancels, it's not a huge impact on revenue," explains Chaudry — while losing one sponsor could upend your income.	When it comes to apparel, not only are you directly monetizing your brand as a creator, you're also getting free advertising space. As for products like food and drink, they're easy for fans to "share with a friend," says Chaudry.	A quick influx of capital can allow a creator to hire support staff, get a bigger studio, or buy new equipment. Spotter's average deal is around $1.5 million, which can mean a lot of improvement to content production in a short period of time.
Cons	It works best with a lot of views, and "getting to that scale can be difficult for creators," Chaudry says. On YouTube, you're pulling in anywhere from $3 to $20 per 1,000 views, but on TikTok, even a million watches will only earn you a measly $20 to $40.	You now have a paying client to answer to — as well as contracts to sign and obligations to fulfill. Also, you've hitched your wagon to another entity, so if a brand ends up in hot water (see BetterHelp or FTX), you may end up taking some heat.	It takes time, dedication, and talent to develop an audience that is willing to pay for your work. You also have to strike a balance — offering enough premium content while producing enough free tidbits to always be enticing.	Launching a company that sells physical products requires, well, a huge investment of resources. "You have to recognize that is a separate company," says Chaudry. "It's a whole new thing, And you need someone to be in charge of that."	You need to have enough completed videos to make an acquisition worth it to the company. Not only that, but you need to be confident that your new videos will make up for any cash you lose from the ads that run against the old ones.
Verdict	Great if you're a megacreator like MrBeast — who reportedly can get more than a billion views in a single month — or good for a smaller one just trying to bring in a few bucks a month. If you're looking to make this a career, you'll want to diversify.	Hard to come by but worth it. Earlier in their career, Colin and Samir had to juggle several contracts, but now, Rosenblum says, "instead of working with 10 different advertisers, we're down to three or four really significant partnerships."	If your audience is passionate enough, subscriptions give you independence. Rosenblum points to comedian Andrew Schulz, who has about 17,500 patrons and makes about $82,000 a month. "[It's] a diehard audience," he says."	It's a huge undertaking, but creators are "winning" by partnering with traditional industries, says Chaudry: "Apparel was first, because those companies could take on that workload." Consumer packaged goods are next.	A great way for an already big creator to take a huge step forward into the next phase of their career. But for those getting started, this should be the end goal — and there are plenty of ways to make money in the meantime.

IMAGES BY GOLOVNIOV/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES; DANIEL MUNOZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; PETER DAZELEY/GETTY IMAGES

HOLLYWOOD'S

CONTENT QUEEN

Keke Palmer is a bona fide movie star, with decades of memorable roles under her belt. But in recent years, she's also become a leader in the creator community

BY CT JONES

IT'S A BREEZY Monday afternoon in New York, and Keke Palmer – actor, director, singer, dancer, professional multitasker – is doing an interview while working on her latest gig: being a new mom. The wind whips through her hair as she pushes her baby down the street, Zooming from her phone. "I'm doing the mom thing," she says in her signature lilt. "Baby is good, but it's definitely a lot of pressure to be responsible for someone's life. I'm tryna to make it, just like your ass is."

That's generous, but let's be honest: Keke Palmer has already made it. While best known for her role as fast-talking horse handler Emerald Hayworth in last year's Jordan Peele horror movie, *Nope*, Palmer, 29, has been kicking around Hollywood for 20 years. She made her big-screen debut in 2004's *Barbershop 2* and scored a starring role in the 2006 family film *Akeelah and the Bee*. Since then, she's had her own Nickelodeon series, *True Jackson VP,* become Broadway's first Black Cinderella, and won acclaim for her sharp comedic timing and emotional depth in films like *Hustlers*.

All the while, Palmer has been doing double duty as a creator. Since at least 2007, she's been active on YouTube, Instagram, and even TikTok's predecessors Musical.ly and Vine, posting skits and videos with thousands of views. Just last year, she brought her live-wire, meme-worthy personality to TikTok, where she's amassed 7.5 million followers, and, during her pregnancy, started livestreaming games on Twitch. But as she became more invested in the creator economy, Palmer realized BIPOC creators were shut out of the information pipeline about how to develop projects and get connected with brands. So she decided to do something about it.

Her new content hub, KeyTV – part production company, part mentorship program, part project incubator – aims to give underrepresented voices a leg up in Hollywood. Launched last November, it pairs up-and-coming creators with industry experts to produce their own projects on social media. In its first six months, the network has premiered nine programs, from talk shows to comedy series to short films, picking up millions of views so far. "KeyTV is focusing on people that might have the talent but not [the] experience or the skill in the business aspect of it," Palmer says. "It's explaining the craft of filmmaking and working in the industry, and built around knowledge as opposed to getting to this grand finish line."

People can't get enough of you online, turning almost anything you say into a meme. How does that make you feel?

It's appreciated when people do the meme thing. I really do love it. I feel like the memes are [people] recognizing that they see themselves in me, which I think is important. I'll see it in my mentions, and I'll laugh, or friends will send it to me. I'm like, "Oh, shit, there's another one."

How did KeyTV come about?

This is essentially a second act for me. Yes, I love to entertain, but also, how can I use that for something bigger? KeyTV was an opportunity for me to create a true network of young people feeling that the industry is accessible to them.

People feel like they can't get forward [because of a] lack of information. The reason [someone] is on the cover of magazines isn't because they're better than you. It's 'cause they paying a publicist $5,000 a month. A big part of this is talking about those kinds of things. It's more so focusing [on] "How can I be skilled in the moves that I'm making? How do I know what relationships to build and what roles to play that are going to benefit me and help me get to the next level?"

DJENEBA ADUAYOM/AUGUST

What do you find most frustrating about the current creator economy?
A lot of times, BIPOC creators will create something, trend something, and then they won't actually get the opportunity to work with the big commercial company. I've wanted to be in the forefront of being able to bring those opportunities to other people of color. Our community, we bring eyes, and we deserve those big opportunities to be able to actually create something for ourselves.

Why was it important for your next stage to be about mentorship?
Growing up, I definitely didn't see the people that I see now. It's not like it is now, like with Issa Rae, Kevin Hart, or Jordan Peele, or Donald Glover. People like Jordan have helped me in many different ways, trusting me as an actor, just giving me an opportunity. Knowing what my journey was, I don't want the conversation to continuously be "You're the first." It shouldn't be a surprise when you see Black people out here killing it.

Did you feel pressure to make this a focus of the next phase of your career?
For me, there's an element to it that says, "[How] am I doing more for my community?" You know, when you think about it, as a Black person, there's so [many] systemic things that have stopped us from being able to do shit. Personally, for me, there is an attraction to being able to leave something behind and do something outside of myself. But I think that's, again, community-based, and also my family and how I grew up.

"YES, I LOVE TO ENTERTAIN, BUT HOW CAN I USE THAT FOR SOMETHING BIGGER?"

How has your online experience impacted how much you've decided to share about your son?
What you have to learn is to be very conscientious and intentional about the things you post. When I posted my son, I did a joke of a Drake lyric: "I'm not hiding the world from my son. I'm hiding my son from the world." Then I was like, "Just kidding, my son's face is on the next page." I do feel like it's not the end of the world if everybody sees my son. I like to keep things personal because I like to keep things that are precious to me private, but then I also don't like to take myself too seriously. So I find times in which I feel most comfortable to do that.

If you were Gen Z, do you think you would still have become an actor?
The concept of fame has become bigger than the concept of skill, or passion, or what you love. It's a crazy-different time. I don't know how that would translate for me. I am very digital, so I do see me popping out like [TikTok food personality] Tabitha Brown or [*Abbott Elementary* creator] Quinta [Brunson]. But at the same time, theater is the background of my mom and how I got to the industry. You're always going to end up where you're gonna end up. And I truly, 100 percent believe that I was made to be [acting]. I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

How do you balance your online persona with your real life?
When people idolize you, you can no longer get through to them. If I'm thinking about popularity, then it should be more a mayor vibe. That is most comfortable for me, as opposed to people bowing at my feet and assuming that I have this lavish life led by greed and capitalism. At the end of the day, I'm a real person, and I want you to be able to see that. What's the point of me being at the top of the mountain if, when I reach my hand down, you feel like you can't touch it?

SYLVIE ROSOKOFF

Kelsey McKinney (left) and Alex Sujong Laughlin of *Normal Gossip*

THE 'NORMAL GOSSIP' GUIDE TO

SPILLING TEA

The hosts of the hit podcast on how to give — and get — good dirt

One of the best, and worst, parts of the internet is how easily it lets us spread gossip. From celebrity feuds to Twitter main characters, any juicy story can go viral in an instant — and any poster can become a top-notch storyteller. But how do we stay a little more on the Gwynaissance side of dirt-mongering (a good-natured meme-ification of a megacelebrity) and a little less on the Caleb from West Elm side (the doxxing of a run-of-the-mill serial dater)? Alex Sujong Laughlin and Kelsey McKinney, the duo behind the hilarious podcast *Normal Gossip* (Season Four is streaming now) — which devotes each episode to an anonymized story of a real-world drama — break down what constitutes good gossip, how to dish responsibly, and which subjects are untouchable.

CHOOSE YOUR GOSSIP WISELY

Sharing stories about people isn't just shooting the shit — it has a purpose. "Gossip as a way to reinforce social standards and create rules for the community has always existed," explains McKinney. "It is funny to read gossip columns from the Thirties and Forties, where it's like, 'Oh, my God, her dress was so short,' and that's scandalous." But if you're going to use this tool, it's important to carefully consider the target. "Gossip about the White House has a different weight than gossip about [a] co-worker," says Laughlin. "It has everything to do with the amount of power that the people have and the power that the narrative about them has. So if that narrative is refuted or undercut in some way, that's going to have an equally powerful effect, either for good or evil."

LEAVE NORMIES OUT OF IT

It's bad enough to try to get into the head of your favorite pop star, but still worse to go after an unknown, unfamous individual. "There's this idea of unintentional virality that everybody now in the world is vulnerable to," says Laughlin. "You can accidentally go viral through seemingly no fault of your own." She cites Couch Guy — a college student whose girlfriend surprised him with a visit to campus, sparking a ruthless curiosity about the nature of his relationship with a girl sitting next to him at a group hang, followed by intense harassment of all three people — as an example of cyber sleuths going too far.

"Say you are sitting on a couch, sitting next to this guy, and then his long-distance girlfriend comes, and it's all filmed, and suddenly there are a million TikToks deconstructing your body language toward this guy, and you did not ask for any of that," she says. "Couch Guy would've been very different if the story had stopped with 'She opens the door, and he doesn't look the most thrilled to see her.' That's funny on its own. Where it became destructive was the hordes of people who decided that it was their right to know everything there is to know about these people and their relationship."

PICK THE RIGHT FRAME

If you want your gossip to catch on like wildfire — for the right reasons — be strategic about your tone. "It's a genuine, warm congeniality, with a sense of humor to it — there's a lightness," says Laughlin. Or, as McKinney puts it, it's "sweet conspiratorial. You're just like, 'Let's create a team. Let's be on a team. I'll tell you everything I know, and you can tell me everything you know, and then together we can thwart our enemies.'" **ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL**

THE SCAM BUSTER OF YOUTUBE

As Coffeezilla, Stephen Findeisen has made it his mission to unravel crypto schemes — before investors lose their shirts

BY MILES KLEE

STEPHEN FINDEISEN, better known as the YouTube star Coffeezilla, is sitting in what appears to be a cyberpunk detective's office, with slow-turning ceiling fans, a bay of screens flashing simulated data, and harsh light filling the windows behind him. It's part of what he jokingly calls his "$10 million studio," which, along with his typical attire of a white-collared shirt and dark suspenders, cast him as an old-school private eye thrust into a bizarre new future. As Coffeezilla, Findeisen investigates the cryptocurrency scams that proliferate across the internet, and at the moment, he's looking into an alleged scheme that resembles a "Bernie Madoff situation," with as much as $300 million stolen by its founder. "It is insane," he says with a laugh.

Such are the high, even ludicrous, stakes of a Coffeezilla story and Findeisen's barely contained giddiness at the prospect of breaking one. The 29-year-old has become a cheerful grim reaper of financial fads, exposing swindlers for an audience now closing in on 3 million. His findings, delivered in playfully edited segments, break down the complex machinations of crypto in terms anyone can understand. Findeisen toggles between winking sarcasm and disbelief over how brazen the industry's worst actors can be.

Findeisen doesn't have a formal education in journalism or business; at Texas A&M University, he studied chemical engineering. "The math helped" with his current work, he says, "but pretty much nothing else." After joining YouTube in 2014, he started posting as a generalist, but eventually found some success breaking down big ideas such as "Why Bad Science Spreads." He kept returning, however, to corporate deception, with titles like "How to Start a Pyramid Scheme."

In 2018, he adopted the Coffeezilla persona and started working on videos that debunked the pitches of multilevel marketers and "fake gurus" offering guaranteed returns on stock trades. From then on, Findeisen was hooked. His "crash course" in fraud involved studying the subject not only from the victim's side, but the perpetrator's as well: "I have people who want to expose their business partner or competitor, and they'll say, 'Let me explain to you how this scam works.' " Findeisen is amused by how eager they are to snitch on one another: "It's a den of snakes, of course!"

The past several months have cemented Coffeezilla as a formidable force. In a three-part series, Findeisen detailed the demise of influencer Logan Paul's "CryptoZoo," an NFT game that never functioned properly after launch, interviewing investors who said they lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Paul has since blamed his developers, but he is named along with other CryptoZoo founders in a class-action lawsuit. (Paul has denied any wrongdoing, and his representatives tell ROLLING STONE that "all deserving parties will be reimbursed.")

Findeisen's reporting has earned him some high-profile fans. "You gotta fight fire with fire," says Ben McKenzie, an actor known for *The O.C.* and *Gotham* who has become Hollywood's most outspoken crypto critic. "Nobel Prize-winning economists have said, 'This is bullshit.' [But] nobody cares. You need people like Coffeezilla out there making YouTube videos."

Some of what Findeisen uncovers can seem to have significant legal ramifications. Following the implosion of the crypto exchange FTX in November, Findeisen confronted its founder, Sam Bankman-Fried, on Twitter's live-audio platform Spaces as the former CEO attempted damage control. Bankman-Fried gave an answer about the co-mingling of customer funds that Findeisen believes amounts to a confession of fraud. Less than a week after Findeisen posted the video of that encounter, Bankman-Fried was arrested on charges including wire fraud and money laundering. He has pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial under house arrest.

That showdown came shortly after Findeisen celebrated the guilty plea of Jebara Igbara, a.k.a. Instagram influencer Jay Mazini. Back in 2021, Findeisen had released videos accusing Igbara of orchestrating financial crimes for which he may now spend 20 years in prison. In court, Igbara admitted to perpetrating investment schemes that netted him around $8 million. To Findeisen, the plea was proof that this work can make a difference: "Influencers are going to be launching new NFTs, wondering, 'Is Coffeezilla coming for me?' "

Findeisen won't say whether governmental agencies have contacted him for information, but he acknowledges that his work is only part of the solution. A big reason Findeisen never runs out of leads, he says, is that "regulators are behind the eight ball – I think even they would admit that."

His role, therefore, is to give people a chance to avoid being hoodwinked in the first place. Hearing from those who are able to move their money before a crash is hugely rewarding for him, even if it's a drop in the bucket. What he's really up against, he says, is a confidence game "as old as time."

"There's no free lunches, and especially no free lunches from a guy in a Lambo," Findeisen says. "Because he had to buy that Lambo. Where do you think he got that money?"

PHOTOGRAPH BY **CHRISTOPHER LEE**

THE YEAR IN INTERNET DOWNFALLS

The internet takes no prisoners — when you screw up, it's open season for dunks, drags, mocking memes, and targeted takedowns. It doesn't matter if you're a hot celebrity with 5 million followers or a random schmuck tweeting from the bus: On social media, anyone can be canceled. Your only hope is that what you did is more "cringe" than controversial, allowing you to coast back into relatively calm waters. On the other hand, some creators have managed to survive one incendiary scandal after another, immune to both scolding and shame. Here's a breakdown of the past year's biggest blowups and how the offenders fared. **MILES KLEE**

COASTING

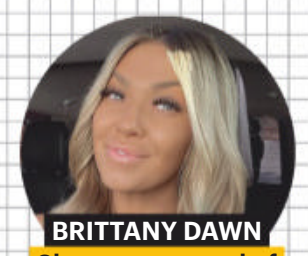
ELON MUSK
He bought Twitter to boost his own corporate propaganda, regressive politics, and terrible jokes. Now, he's only the *second*-richest person in the world.

JORDAN PETERSON
The right-wing provocateur posted what he thought was a video of a Chinese facility harvesting human sperm with dick-sucking machines — but it was just fetish content.

CRINGEY

ADAM LEVINE
Thanks to the Maroon 5 singer's flirty DMs with influencers, "That body of yours is absurd" is now an acceptable sext.

MIKAYLA NOGUEIRA
The beauty influencer touted a new mascara on TikTok — but accusations that she was wearing lash extensions sparked a discourse about truth in advertising.



BRITTANY DAWN
She was accused of selling fake fitness packages — and pocketing up to a million dollars. (She's denied the allegations and vowed to "fight back.")

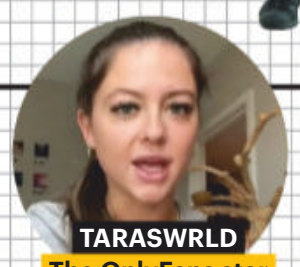
LIVER KING
The mega-macho creator swore that he'd bulked up on raw animal testicles as part of a caveman lifestyle. Surprise! It was steroids. Now that he claims to be off the juice, we can continue to enjoy his deranged content.

J.K. ROWLING
The *Harry Potter* author claims she just wants women-only spaces — but she can't seem to stop tweeting transphobic content.

AARON RODGERS
Even before he led the Packers to a disastrous season, the four-time MVP became the laughingstock of the NFL for peddling anti-vax views on Joe Rogan's podcast.

CONTROVERSIAL

JAMES CORDEN & KEITH MCNALLY
Terminally online restaurateur Keith McNally posted about how the late-night host acted like an asshole at his restaurant, Balthazar. Corden apologized. McNally backtracked. Honestly, they both came out looking equally bad.



TARASWRLD
The OnlyFans star complained about $10,000 Harry Styles tickets. When she declared she was "finna be in the pit," the mockery became a meme.

EMU LADY (THE FLORIDA ONE)
There were two women who went viral for their emus. This one faced a backlash over cuddling hers when it was potentially infected with deadly avian flu.

ANDREW TATE
He bragged about convincing women to do his bidding, then got arrested for sex trafficking. Though he's pleaded his innocence, the negative attention may have blown up his spot as the god of angry teenage boys.

JEFFREE STAR
The ur-problematic beauty influencer has been canceled so many times we've lost count, yet somehow keeps making headlines for his dodgy comments and behavior.

TRY GUYS
They were the internet's favorite wife guys, until it turned out one of them was having an affair with an employee. The scandal was whatever. Having to learn about it? Unforgivable.

KYRIE IRVING
His anti-vaccine-mandate statements weren't great, but it was an antisemitic video he linked that brought the hammer down (got him traded to Dallas).

SCOTT ADAMS
The *Dilbert* creator has a long history of offensive comments, but a pro-segregation rant on his podcast was the last straw.

CANCELED

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; STEFANIE KEENAN/GETTY IMAGES; MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS WILLIAMSON/GETTY IMAGES; MEGA/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; BRITTANY DAWN/YOUTUBE; DAVE J HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES; JFIZZY/STAR MAX/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; GETTY IMAGES; *TARASWRLD/TIKTOK*; MIHAI BARBU/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; AUBREY LAO/GETTY IMAGES; TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; JEREMY MOELLER/GETTY IMAGES; MEGAN BRIGGS/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL TULLBERG/GETTY IMAGES; LEA SUZUKI/"SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE"/GETTY IMAGES

HOUSE MUSIC'S CIVIL WAR

DECADES AFTER CHICAGO'S TRAX RECORDS CHANGED DANCE MUSIC FOREVER, FORMER FRIENDS ARE LOCKED IN AN INTENSE BATTLE OVER THE LABEL

BY OLI COLEMAN

IN THE EARLY DAYS of house music, nobody hustled harder than Vince Lawrence. ➤ Vince grew up on the South Side of Chicago. As a teenager in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was urbane and in the know: He liked Izod shirts, white K-Swiss sneakers, and straight-leg jeans; he ran hip parties, loved import records from Europe, and aspired to make music of his own. A lot of what he and his friends were into, he remembers, "came from us reading *GQ* and wishing we were rich." ➤ Around then, there was a specific vibe at Chicago's high school parties, downtown gay clubs, and on local radio – underground but not exclusive, sophisticated but not so preening that nobody wanted to dance. It was "house" culture, named after a club called the Warehouse. At first, "house music" meant anything that the club's DJ, Frankie Knuckles, played – disco, Italo disco, Philly soul, New Wave, even punk. Amid that swirl, perfectly on-beat digital rhythms meant DJs could experiment with seamless mixing, and synthesizers were becoming affordable enough to be available outside of studios. The result was a new sound – heavy, stripped-down, synthetic but groove-rich – made by Vince, his friend Jesse Saunders, and other, mostly Black, kids. It was what the world came to know as house music, and for all of its epochal innovation,

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRIS

TRAX
RECORDS

Vince says it had a simple appeal: "It was the best we could do, and we knew it worked at the parties."

Vince and Jesse couldn't wait to get the new sound onto vinyl, and brought it to Larry Sherman, a thirty-something son of Chicago who owned a record-pressing plant on the South Side. Soon, Trax Records was born. In the label's early days, Vince was busy beyond just making his own music. In the daytime, he and a small staff ran the presses and put records in sleeves and jackets, and Vince made sales calls and negotiated with distributors, among other things. At night, he went to the club to hand out promo pressings to DJs and see how the dance floor responded to new tracks. Vince says he designed the Trax logo, inspired by the stark, highly legible block-capital typefaces associated with the industrial-music scene. (He also figured that a stark, white-on-black logo would catch the eye of a DJ in a dark club rummaging through vinyl for their next jam.)

Trax captured the Big Bang of a youth movement: It was the first label, in January 1984, to release house and, in the space of two years, put out both the genre-defining "Move Your Body (The House Music Anthem)," by Marshall Jefferson, and the genre redefining "Acid Trax," by Phuture. The latter song gave the world the first real taste of acid house, the subgenre that later crossed the Atlantic and took over youth culture in the U.K. in a loud, shrill, gorgeous, hormonally haywire kind of way. What Trax helped start has since synthesized into the $7-billion-a-year EDM business, and Chicago house has recently been growling through the mainstream in major ways: Beyoncé's *Renaissance* and Drake's *Honestly, Nevermind,* both from last year, were homages, with house grooves coursing through their tracks.

But today, the house of Trax is in disarray. Vince and 22 original Trax artists are locked in a legal battle over the rights to their classic music with the current co-owner of the company, Rachael Cain, Vince's one-time friend and Larry's ex-wife. It amounts to a civil war over the catalog of arguably the most important label in the history of house music.

Vince recently turned 59. A few years ago, his wife, Tara, asked him to start getting his affairs together; life insurance, that kind of thing. They have a nine-year-old son, London, to think about. Vince, who left Trax in 1986, started to pull documentation of his music from a long and varied musical career, to get it all in one place for his family, just in case. But when he began to look at statements that laid out who owned the publishing for songs he had written, he says he was baffled. He found some 30 songs, he says, that had nothing to do with Trax – that, he claims, he recorded for other labels or for himself – had been registered to the label, meaning Trax, in effect, owned the songs and was therefore getting checks that, Vince says, he should have been getting.

Once he grasped the scope of the irregularities, Vince called Rachael, who has owned 50 percent of Trax since 2006, as a result of her divorce from Larry. (Larry died in 2020; his widow, Sandyee Sherman, owns the other half.) "Rachael," Vince remembers telling her, "give [the songs] back. You're making a mistake." Rachael, he says, refused, and Vince says he got a message from Trax saying something to the effect of "We don't have a contract [proving we own the songs], but we're going to assert a claim anyway, until a court says otherwise."

" 'What you're telling me is you know you have no deal, you know that it's mine, and you're not giving it to me unless I sue you?' " Vince recalls saying. "So I said, 'My son is going to have my [songs], and I don't give a fuck anymore.' " (Rachael denies the exchange happened; "Vince fabricated that scenario," she says.)

Vince says he told Rachael's lawyer, "You're going to remember the day when all I was asking for was these 30 songs."

Almost since the earliest days of the label, Vince says, there has been an ever-growing resentment among classic Trax artists. They say they have been deprived of what's rightfully theirs by Larry, by Rachael, or by both. And all it took was a little encouragement to bring them into battle.

In October, Vince and his lawyer, Sean Mulroney, filed a suit against Rachael, Trax, Sandyee Sherman, and the Sherman estate on behalf of the plaintiffs, 22 men and one woman, mostly Black, all of them first-wave Chicago house musicians. The plaintiffs claim they never signed contracts selling all the rights to their work to Larry, but that he – and later Rachael – simply registered the copyright to their work to Trax anyway. They believe Trax either sold copies of that music or licensed it for movies, video games, etc., and pocketed the money. (Rachael denies that, claiming Trax has had valid contracts for every piece

THE TRAX LAWSUIT BEGAN WITH A DISPUTE OVER PUBLISHING RIGHTS. "YOU'LL REMEMBER THE DAY," VINCE TOLD RACHAEL'S LAWYER, "WHEN ALL I WAS ASKING FOR WAS THESE 30 SONGS."

Vince Lawrence grew up on Chicago's South Side and helped house music get off the ground.

OLI COLEMAN *is deputy editor of the New York Post's Page Six. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **LYNDON FRENCH**

PREVIOUS PAGE: IMAGES IN ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF RACHAEL CAIN; COURTESY OF VINCE LAWRENCE; GETTY IMAGES, 2

“WHEN [VINCE AND THE OTHER PLAINTIFFS] DIDN’T HELP TO SAVE THIS COMPANY FOR ALL THOSE YEARS,” RACHAEL SAYS, “I RISKED EVERYTHING. I WAS THE ONE WHO FOUGHT.”

North Side native and current Trax co-owner Rachael Cain at her former home in Lake Point Tower

HAIR BY BETO SANCHEZ @BETOLOVESHAIR. MAKEUP BY MOLLY DIXON @MLDYMUA, AT ULTA BEAUTY, MICHIGAN AVENUE, CHICAGO.

of music it controls, though she admits that some of the physical contracts have been lost along the label’s tumultuous and winding path.)

Some of the plaintiffs are the superstars of Trax, like Jefferson, but they also include musicians who doubled as workers in the Trax warehouse back in the day, as well as Maurice Joshua, who launched a career with Trax and went on to win a Grammy for his remix of Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love.” Several are people Rachael, who’s been involved with house music from the beginning, once considered to be close friends.

It turns out that Rachael has her own story to tell, about why she has clung to Trax through ordeal after ordeal, in the face of increasingly bitter opposition. She’ll tell you that she’s risked everything in order to fend off bigger businesses bent on taking the catalog, and that all she gets in return is anger and recrimination.

THE COPS SAID it was arson – that Larry Sherman and his pal Richard Randazzo set fire to an old tavern, Smugglers, just off Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. Larry, according to Rachael, would claim he was called to a meeting, and the door to Smugglers was booby-trapped, that he tripped something when he opened it.

Either way, on Sunday, Aug. 31, 1980, there was an explosion that set Smugglers ablaze. A man later identified as Randazzo was seen running from Smugglers. Larry ran away too, bleeding from the head. They both jumped in a car and sped away. Larry got third-degree burns and ended up in the hospital, according to Rachael.

Randazzo was acquitted of arson; Larry was never charged. Larry’s brother, Curt – and Larry himself, according to Rachael – believed the explosion was meant to kill Larry. The Mob, probably – some kind of gangsters, anyway. (Vince lived with Larry for a while, and says Larry sometimes talked about being involved with organized crime. “You know how they say ‘Fell off a truck’?” asks Vince. “When they show up with the whole trailer, you think, ‘Maybe some of this is true.’ ”)

The point is, Larry was involved in the dark side of Chicago business for much of his life – and when he got into the music industry, it wasn’t exactly to become Clive Davis. He and Curt had grown up on Chicago’s South Side. Their dad died in 1955, when Larry was six. His mother had to take over the family business, a machine shop that made gears. “She lost that,” Curt says, “and after that it was just kind of a struggle to survive.... We hustled from the beginning.” Curt says Larry got into stealing cars, then robbing rail freight. Curt knew this, not least because he and his brother got into the trucking business together, and Larry used their docks to move the stuff.

When Larry started in the record business in the early 1980s, it was a neat little polka hustle. Chicago has one of the world’s largest Polish populations outside of Poland, and back then Bel-Aire Records – owned by Eddie Blazonczyk of Eddie Blazonczyk and the Versatones, the man behind “Polish and Proud of It” and “Everybody Polka,” among others – was, according to Vince, the largest polka label in America. As Vince remembers it, Larry bought the only two vinyl presses in Chicago from a guy whose company had been manufacturing the Bel-Aire catalog. “So Larry was making these records for Eddie Blazonczyk,” Vince says. “Selling shit tons of polka records.”

He also bootlegged. Wurlitzer, as Vince remembers, had stopped producing the super-thick 78 rpm singles that fit its jukebox mechanism, so Larry was copying all kinds of music onto these chunky old 78s and selling them to enthusiasts. (Larry was eventually indicted on 51 counts of unlawful use of sound recording, though he pleaded guilty to only a single count. He was sentenced to community service and probation, and had his case disposed of.)

Meanwhile, Vince and Jesse Saunders started making tracks with a drum machine, and when one of their tunes, “On and On,” took off at an underage nightclub called the Playground, and other teen parties, Vince knew from his dad (who owned his own label) where to go to get it pressed up: at Larry Sherman’s plant. Once Jesse and Vince showed off their own record at the Playground, every DJ at the parties, clubs, and the house radio station seemed to show up at Larry’s warehouse with a tape to pitch.

Largely by virtue of owning the warehouse and being a decade or so older than Vince and Jesse, Larry was by most accounts the de facto head of Trax. He liked to operate in cash; he prided himself on squeezing deals out of the young, unrepresented, mostly Black artists. Rachael says he kept a stack of crisp bills on his desk when he was negotiating – he’d tell an artist that they could have a wad of cash

now, or they could take the contract away and have a lawyer read it – but the pile of cash might be gone when they came back. He quickly became notorious for failing to cough up the scant advances and royalties he did promise the acts. Vince says there was only a halfhearted attempt at a system for calculating or paying royalties. Mostly, he says, artists would get a somewhat arbitrary sum of money if Larry wanted to entice them to record more music.

Vince says he never signed any ownership paperwork for the label. He thinks the company was only incorporated when orders became big enough that Larry was reluctantly forced to start using checks.

In his memoir, *The Diary of a DJ,* Marshall Jefferson remembers a time when Larry for some reason stuck only Jefferson's name on "Move Your Body (The House Music Anthem)." In fact, the record was made by Jefferson and three buddies: Curtis McClain, Rudy Forbes, and Tom Carr, who went down to Trax to confront Larry about it. Larry told them he'd paid Jefferson $150,000 for the record. (He hadn't, Jefferson says.) Larry's lie caused a whirl of mistrust and recriminations among the friends.

Meanwhile, in the mid-Eighties, Rachael was busy getting her own music career off the ground. She had grown up on Chicago's North Side, enduring what she describes as a terribly lonely childhood. In 1984, under her stage name Screamin' Rachael, she recorded an important track with Jesse and Vince, "Fantasy," likely the first house track to feature a singer. Jesse called Rachael a "key ingredient" in the track and "a great rock vocalist" in his 2007 memoir, *House Music: The Real Story.*

The way Rachael remembers it, she met Vince and Jesse when they came to see her punk band, Screamin' Rachael and Remote. That's not how Vince remembers it. "I told my dad we needed to find a singer and we wanted somebody white, because there was a record called 'Calling All Boys,' by the Flirts," he says. "We wanted somebody who sang like that. We saw pictures of Rachael in some punk band, and we were like, 'Oooh, she's good-looking. We can use that to sell records.' "

And after "Fantasy" came out, the way Rachael remembers it, they were a gang – Rachael, Vince, Jesse, and Jefferson. She says she and Vince used to take out Larry's Corvette; she and Jefferson toured together, spent holidays together. As Jesse recalls in his memoir, Rachael gave him an added assist, persuading her pal, the late lawyer Jay B. Ross, to loan Jesse five grand to get Jesse's label, Jes Say, off the ground. "Screaming Rachel ... was once again an angel to me," Jesse wrote. (Jesse, who is recovering from a stroke and answered questions for this story via email, appears to have changed his outlook since the book was published, now saying: "All she did was introduce me to Jay B. Ross, who proceeded to steal all my money.")

Jesse, Rachael, and Vince all signed big record deals on the coasts in 1986 and left Trax behind. Vince and Jesse both went with Geffen, out of L.A.; Rachael signed with Arthur Baker's Streetwise Records in New York, and did a deal with Warner Music Group's German label, Teldec.

All three of them crashed. Rachael's labelmates New Edition sued Streetwise out of existence, and Geffen just didn't get Vince's work, he says. Jesse formed Jesse's Gang with Trax artist Duane Buford and singer Twala Jones, and got an album, *Center of Attraction*, onto shelves in 1987. But Geffen didn't pick him up for another record.

FOR ALL OF ITS EPOCHAL INNOVATION, VINCE SAYS EARLY HOUSE MUSIC BOILED DOWN TO A SIMPLE TRUTH: "IT WAS THE BEST WE COULD DO, AND WE KNEW IT WORKED AT THE PARTIES."

Vince (second from left) and Jesse Saunders (second from right) in 1984

Vince's L.A. experience left him bitter, and soon he withdrew to Larry's warehouse world. Vince started a new label, No L.A. Bull (pronounced "No Label"), in partnership with Larry, who fronted the vinyl and pressed the records. The profits usually came in the form of cash, which Vince and Larry simply split up on the spot. And just like the old days, Vince says, there wasn't a contract between the two.

In 1989, Vince ended up making music for commercials. He was also making house remixes of pop tracks for about $20,000 each, doing a couple a month and making $300,000 or $400,000 a year between the two endeavors. After that, Vince put out records here and there on Trax or No L.A. Bull. Larry would give him $5,000 or he wouldn't; with the commercials and remix income, it didn't really matter. "So then I played with Larry for fun," he says. "Not for my living."

BY THE EARLY 1990s, Larry was living at an address that would one day house notable Chicagoans – perhaps the most notable living Chicagoans of all, in fact: the Obamas. The former polka-records guy had moved into 5046 South Greenwood Ave., the six-bedroom brick Georgian in semi-urban Kenwood that would become the Obamas' place in Chicago during all eight of their years in the White House.

Around 1996, Rachael and Larry ran into each other on the beachfront promenade in Cannes, France. Larry was with the house superstar Joe Smooth, producer of the 1987 gospel-like house pillar "Promised Land"; all three were in Cannes for MIDEM, a music-industry conference. Larry saw Rachael from a cab and told her to get in.

Larry persuaded Rachael to come back to Chicago. Larry, she recalls, told her she needed a change, and he needed a star artist to record. Rachael said she'd come back, but only if he made her president of Trax – which he did, in lieu of a salary. (He also gave her a small stake in the company, and she also made cash, she says, by cutting international licensing deals for Trax-owned music.) Working for Trax was an exciting prospect. Rachael remembered the buzz around the factory, everyone pitching in with shrink-wrapping and boxing up records. And she'd learned a lot about the music business in New York, particularly working at Sugar Hill Records, the pioneering hip-hop label that had put out "Rapper's Delight."

Larry and Rachael started dating, and Larry moved her into what would one day be known as "the Obama house." Rachael, it turns out, didn't like being out there in Kenwood, so far from downtown, so they soon relocated to the chic address of Lake Point Tower, right on the shore of Lake Michigan.

But the giddy optimism of Rachael's homecoming was soon replaced by something much darker. Not long after moving back to Chicago, she says, Larry hit her for the first time. It was over a vet's bill. Boss, the Trax warehouse cat (so called because she liked to sit in Larry's chair), needed $1,000 worth of care. They fought over it. "That was when he gave me my first black eye," she says. On another occasion, Dec. 4, 1998, according to his arrest records, Larry "grabbed and jerked her left arm and slapped her" at Lake Point Tower. "[Cain] had to go to the hospital."

Another time, Rachael says, Larry flew into a rage while spending the evening at a movie theater with Rachael and his daughter from his first marriage, Tessa. He got into his car and sped toward them, narrowly missing them. "Who knows what happened, but he got mad," says Tessa. "Sometimes people just do stuff when they're angry. Like slam on the gas and swerve the car."

COURTESY OF VINCE LAWRENCE

Screamin' Rachael sang in punk bands and on house tracks like "Fantasy," cut with Vince and Jesse.

Rachael's home in Lake Point Tower became fodder for her detractors.

Rachael with Larry. The couple split up Trax in their divorce, despite not owning it at the time.

That night, Shar, Larry's previous wife and Tessa's mother, showed up and offered Rachael a place to stay. "[Tessa's] mom came to kind of save us," Rachael says. "And I still went away with Larry. I went to stay with Larry instead of going with them, which I probably should have."

The couple married in 1999. It was a difficult relationship to understand, Rachael admits – even, at times, for her. "There were a lot of horrible things about Larry," says Rachael. "But at the beginning, it wasn't horrible like that. He was like a big kid in many ways, at least at first, before he lost his mind totally. He was a big Disney fanatic. He loved *Beauty and the Beast*, going to Disney [parks]."

On March 5, 2003, Rachael swore in a petition for an order of protection from Larry: "My spouse threatened to maim me for life [this morning], grabbed me, threw me across the room. Threw and broke many of my personal items."

"I am in fear for my life," she added. "He is twice my size."

Rachael moved out several times, but kept going back. "I think I had such low self-esteem," she says. "I don't think I ever thought that I wanted that. But I guess you kind of accept it in a way, because maybe you think that you're not worth [something better]."

As Rachael was living through this maelstrom, Trax was foundering. Not long after she got together with Larry, Rachael discovered that the Trax plant was all but deserted. The power had been shut off – Larry was something like $35,000 behind on the electric bill. Larry told the *Chicago Tribune* that Trax went bankrupt back in 1991, after distributors that owed him $4.5 million went out of business. (How does one live in a swank lakefront apartment while being literally unable to keep the lights on at work? "If he had $10 in his pocket," Curt Sherman says of his brother, "he'd spend $20.")

Rachael and Larry had to use AuctionWeb – soon to be renamed eBay – to make ends meet. "Larry was totally on the Steiff thing," says a longtime friend of the couple, fashion designer Michael White. Steiff: as in the much-coveted, high-end teddy bears. Larry was selling them on eBay for up to $2,000, according to White.

In 2002, a Canadian music-publishing company, Casablanca (not to be confused with the U.S.-based disco label), made them an offer. Casablanca would get licenses to the Trax catalog, which would allow Casablanca to sell Trax music, market it to people making movies, commercials, and video games, and make its own sublicensing deals around the world. In return, Casablanca would pay them $20,000 a month as an advance against revenue from relicensing the tunes (Rachael says that it ended up being $10,000). It would also loan them $100,000, using the label as collateral.

It was a terrible deal, something like gambling the deed to your house on the flip of a coin. But Larry was out of options, and both he and Rachael signed it. Rachael says he forced her to do it.

Larry spent much of the money on state-of-the-art equipment and hiring full-time engineers – which, Rachael protested, they could not afford – for a studio. According to court papers from the time, Casablanca – in addition to the $100,000 loan – paid Rachael and Larry an advance of $367,000.

Larry and Rachael defaulted on the loan, according to a legal filing, and when the licenses didn't cover the advance, they had to pay the advances back. And when they couldn't do that, Casablanca collected on the debt. In 2006, the company obtained a court order, and one morning two Cook County sheriff's deputies arrived at Lake Point Tower with some movers and seized computers, master tapes, filing cabinets, recording equipment, and anything that belonged to Trax. Casablanca put Trax up for auction, but Casablanca itself was the highest bidder. Larry and Rachael were both left out in the cold, with nothing to do but fight desperately to wrest the label back.

The apartment at Lake Point Tower went into foreclosure – which, in one way at least, was a good thing. It meant that Lawyers for the Creative Arts, a group of volunteer attorneys who represent underfunded people in the arts, agreed to represent Larry and Rachael, and began litigation to get Trax back from Casablanca.

Around the same time, Rachael finally left Larry. On April 25, 2006, Dr. Joan M. Anzia, the medical director of the outpatient treatment center of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, wrote a letter urging the courts to grant Rachael an immediate divorce. "Ms. Cain has been a patient of this clinic since 1996," she wrote. "The patient has been contending with multiple types of abuse since being married to Larry Sherman. These abuses include: physical, sexual, emotional, financial, and also many instances of coercing Ms. Cain to sign legal documents that she did not want to sign. There have been occasions when the patient was handcuffed to a chair and told that if she did not sign documents he would kill her." (Anzia declined to comment for this story.)

A week after the letter, Rachael and Larry divorced. The former couple were so determined to get Trax back from Casablanca, Rachael says, that they divided it up in the settlement, even though they didn't even own it at the time.

In 2007, Casablanca licensed the classic Trax catalog to Demon Music Group, a company owned by the BBC that deals largely in entire vintage catalogs, often packaging them up as bargain-bin compilations sold in supermarkets. In 2012, Rachael and Larry got back ownership of Trax from Casablanca, but the deal that Casablanca struck with Demon giving it exclusive rights to the catalog remained in place.

Larry spent the last years of his life at the Paradise Park mobile-home park in Lynwood, Illinois, with Sandyee. He often railed against [*Cont. on 78*]

CENTER PHOTOGRAPH BY LYNDON FRENCH.
LEFT AND RIGHT: COURTESY OF RACHAEL CAIN

THE MISSIONARY

Eubank leading his Free Burma Rangers in December

MINISTER OF WAR

For 25 years, ex-Special Forces officer Dave Eubank has been dodging bullets to bring humanitarian aid to rebels in Burma's ongoing civil war. Critics say he blurs the line between combat and relief work while proselytizing the Gospel. RS spent three weeks in the jungle with him to try to learn the truth

BY JASON MOTLAGH

D

AVE EUBANK makes an exploding gesture with his fist to alert the guerrilla soldiers following him of the danger ahead. "From here until we pass the road, the trail is lined with mines," he says, scanning the mountainous Burmese jungle for signs of trouble. "Watch where you step." As his signal relays down the line, conversations fall silent and the air hums with only the sound of heavy breathing and hundreds of footsteps on hard-packed ground.

Eubank picks up the pace, slashing through brush and thorny stalks that tear at his clothing. A former U.S. Special Forces officer and ordained Christian minister, he started the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) in the late 1990s to provide medical care and aid to people resisting the Southeast Asian nation's military junta, a brutal dictatorship that has crushed dissent and oppressed ethnic minorities for seven decades in what is the world's longest-running civil war. With a few volunteers and his own wife and kids in tow, Eubank set FBR apart with a relentless commitment to go places other humanitarian groups would not. And that's built FBR into a movement that fields teams and tracks human-rights abuses across Burma's front lines and beyond, from northern Syria to Sudan. But critics say Eubank is a Christian zealot who is risking the lives of his family and followers in a vacuum of oversight. They claim FBR is blurring the line between humanitarian work and ideological activism by training and, at times, fighting alongside armed groups while preaching the Gospels of Jesus.

At 62, Eubank is still fighting fit, with a lean, compact frame, oversize feet in constant motion, and eyes that seldom blink beneath the brim of his camo hat. On this December morning, he's leading his biggest mission yet: a two-week trek through eastern Karen State to deliver critically needed aid, scope enemy positions, and test the nerves of 205 new rangers. The crux of the day is crossing a road that links two Burma Army bases and sees frequent government patrols. Eubank has done it dozens of times, but in the past could rely on stealth and the agility of small numbers in the event of a firefight. This year's group is more than triple the size of any before it.

In February 2021, a decade-long period of quasi-democracy ended in Burma (now known as Myanmar) when the military seized back power in a coup. Protesters were gunned down in the streets and opposition supporters arrested, tortured, and disappeared. But unlike past uprisings, this generation is refusing to back down. Revolutionary militias called People's Defense Forces (PDFs) made up of mostly Burmans, the country's ethnic majority, are attacking the regime in cities and lowland areas that have never before seen fighting, and bolstering ethnic armed groups in the borderlands. Violence in Burma is, according to Eubank, "at its highest level since World War II." In 2022, 15 rangers were killed in the field, the deadliest year yet.

TRAINING CAMP

In an unusual arrangement, FBR and ethnic resistance groups cooperate, drill, and work out side by side under Eubank's direction.

Under pressure, the junta's army is doing what it always has but at greater scale: torching villages; executing political prisoners; and deliberately targeting schools, churches, and large civilian gatherings with airstrikes to sow terror. "There is a level of anger and frustration [in the Burma Army] that basically, given the spread of martial law, says you can do what you fucking want and you can get away with it," says Anthony Davis, a Bangkok-based security analyst. Thousands have died, and more than 3 million people are internally displaced. In March 2022, the U.S. government made an official determination that the Burma Army committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya minority. That has done noth-

Contributing editor JASON MOTLAGH'S *film about Afghanistan, "Riders on the Storm," is out now.*

ing to dim the military's aggression. Reports of rape, torture, and beheadings are widespread. And with violence at an all-time high, demand among resistance groups for the aid and expertise FBR offers has surged.

All of which makes crossing this Burma Army road trickier than usual. The junction is a riot of overgrowth and we're late, raising the odds of running into a government patrol. Although FBR-allied rebel fighters from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) have scouted the area in advance, one enemy base is less than a mile away. On previous occasions, Eubank, who carries a 9 mm handgun under his shirt, has run into soldiers guarding the crossing at night and had to back off.

One by one, the long procession of rangers files past. Greenhorns and seasoned instructors and ethnic fighters are mingled with about 30 foreign volunteers, including Eubank's always smiling, deceptively tough wife, Karen, and three children, who have spent the better part of their lives in the jungle. Daughters Sahale, 22, and Suuzanne (named after Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi), 20, drive a string of pack horses bearing medical supplies. Pete, 17, strolls past with his pet macaque clinging to his shoulders.

PRAYER WARRIORS

Eubank puts recruits through rigorous physical tests. He asks them to consult God before missions, telling them, "Be sure it's part of his plan for you."

I follow a KNLA fighter down the road when he notices some of the elephant grass has been trampled and waves me back. The Burma Army appears to have patrolled earlier that morning, and the scouts missed the signs. It's likely fresh mines have been planted nearby. We retrace our steps back to the junction and keep watch.

When the last ranger finally goes by, Eubank embraces his militia friends and then, in an unusual move for the leader of a relief organization, presses a little cash into their hands. "Christmas present," he whispers, thanking them in a Karen dialect. Then he starts bounding up the trail toward his place at the front of the line, at once excited and relieved to have slipped the Burma Army again.

GETTING INSIDE BURMA to report on its ethnic conflicts has never been easy. For decades, the country, home to more than 51 million people and 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, was closed like a tropical North Korea: The government kept a black list of journalists, entire regions were off-limits, and legions of plainclothes security agents tracked one's every move. Since the coup, travel outside major cities has become next to impossible. Linking up with rebel groups requires crossing borders and hiking from several days to a week through calf-busting mountains with fluid front lines. Travel is, with rare exceptions, on foot, and provisions must be lugged in a backpack. And if something goes wrong, there are no hospitals or medevacs. The combination of time needed, physical rigor, and a general lack of appetite among media outlets has reduced coverage to a trickle, despite the Burma Army's staggering record of atrocities.

Starting in late December, I spent three weeks with Eubank and the rangers in the jungle, going on missions and trying to understand what would drive a man to not just lead a crusade in the bush but to also haul his wife and children with him. In nearly two decades of conflict reporting, I've never encountered anyone like Eubank – an ardent believer with deeply held conservative values willing to risk his own life and family for a faraway cause. And not only offer much-needed aid and relief to the persecuted and battle-scarred, but also money and muscle. The heroic and unsettling walking side by side.

I first crossed paths with Eubank back in 2012, en route to northern Kachin State to make a film about the Burma Army's theft of resources and attacks against civilians. In a deserted airport in China, I passed the Eubanks on their way home after a two-month mission. They wore shirts that read "Free the Oppressed" and carried themselves with the jovial manner of a family on holiday.

Later I learned Eubank was nicknamed "Mad Dog" and "Father of the White Monkey," and led an all-volunteer staff of ethnic minorities and foreigners – many of them ex-military – working on the front

line. Controversially, some team members carried weapons, ready to fight the Burma Army if they came under attack. Others carried video cameras to document war crimes. Word was the charismatic American triathlete could cover 40-plus miles of hostile terrain in a single day while preaching the good book.

Burma's lawless depths have attracted plenty of G.I. Joe wannabe's with a messiah complex. From a distance, it's easy to think of Eubank as a Bible-thumping mashup of Colonel Kurtz and Captain Fantastic. But even the most hard-boiled Southeast Asia hands agree that in a world of counterfeits, Eubank is the real deal: a diehard humanitarian who has risked his life time and again to help the most vulnerable in a forsaken place that most Americans can't find on a map.

"I admire [FBR's] commitment, valor, and humanity. They don't pretend to be anything other than what they are: in solidarity with people being targeted in war," says Dave Mathieson, an independent analyst who tracks conflict and humanitarian matters in Burma. "One can take issues with militarized approaches to aid, especially when tied with fervent religious beliefs, but when it works so productively with FBR, it can't be faulted." Or as Phil Thornton, a veteran journalist based on the Thai-Burma border puts it: "He's a bit mad, but he does great stuff."

For his part, Eubank dismisses any notion that he's running a paramilitary operation. "We don't have the most dangerous job in the world because we're not trying to fight the Burma Army; we're trying to avoid them and help people," Eubank says. "There are organizations that are bigger, stronger, better than us, but if they won't go, you gotta go," he adds. "I keep praying, and God keeps sending me."

Eubank prays aloud more often than anyone I've ever met. On the phone, when under attack, for large crowds and passing strangers, even midsentence. Often he'll be talking in his crisp, rapid-fire cadence and then slip in a prayer that's only discernible by the closing phrase, *In Jesus' name, amen*. Such religiosity can come across as pious and performative when delivered from the pulpit. With Eubank, though, all the prayer somehow feels endearing, a genuine hedge against existential threats that are very real.

Eubank insists that love is the force that drives him to take extreme risks, and also what makes FBR so effective. "[You will] run forward through the bullets, even if you don't know the person you're trying to save," he says. "If I'm shot and I'm bleeding out on the trail and dying and I can't see my wife and kids again – if I'm not doing that for love, what a disaster."

Born in Texas and brought to Thailand by missionary parents, Eubank spent his childhood in the hills around Chiang Mai. He accompanied his father to remote villages to spread the word, and could shoot a rifle, swim, and ride bareback by the age of five. The war in neighboring Vietnam was ramping up, and it stoked an inborn desire to test himself and, as he says, "get into the fight as soon as possible." He got into trouble, looked for brawls at school and in the street. His Boy Scout troop was trained by U.S. Special Forces and CIA on leave from the war.

Determined to go to war and "fight for freedom," Eubank went to Texas A&M on an ROTC scholarship and entered the Army. At 22, he commanded a platoon in Panama and was selected for a Ranger unit based in Washington state, where he was later assigned to lead a Special Forces A-team. Between missions, he summited peaks in the Cascades, married and divorced, and began to question life in the military. He met Karen, then a special-education teacher. Leaving the Army 10 years in as a major, he enrolled in seminary and pursued her with the same zeal as everything else.

In 1993, Eubank was invited back to Southeast Asia by a tribal leader of the Wa, an ethnic group in northern Burma facing a drug crisis. He took it as a sign from God and told Karen he'd like her to join him as his wife. She agreed, plunging headlong into a life she couldn't have imagined. "I had never planned to travel overseas," she says. "And then I'm riding in the back of a huge truck with resistance fighters, guns poking me all over the place."

Four years later, the couple founded FBR in response to a Burma Army offensive that uprooted more than 500,000 people. Volunteers had to meet three requirements: be literate, not run away from the enemy if villagers could not, and do the work "for love" since no one is paid.

Having kids and bringing them up inside Burma came with risks. But the communities and fellow rangers embraced the Eubank children as their own, cultivating a bond forged in shared danger. While Eubank was out running missions, Karen homeschooled the kids and saved them from vipers lurking in the toilet. She launched a children's program and expanded it with their help. Over the years, the kids endured life-threatening illness, sniper fire, airstrikes, and the loss of loved ones – but also experiences and perspectives that few contemporaries can share.

"Growing up here versus America was a blessing we didn't deserve," says Sahale. "When I hear the word 'trauma,' it's hard for me because this is our life, and I feel like in this day and age, people use trauma as a way to excuse their behaviors.... Our [ethnic Karen] aunts and uncles smile through their pain – they choose joy and gratefulness – which is inspirational because they have nothing, but they give everything."

Every summer, the Eubanks travel the U.S. to see friends, share their story, and raise money. In between donor meetings and church events, the family motors around in a mud-streaked Toyota rig on escapades that range from skydiving and mountain climbing to bear hunting in Alaska. The kids are known to drop into the Cody Nite Rodeo in Wyoming on borrowed horses and win belt buckles.

In October, I met up with the Eubanks outside College Station, Texas, near the end of their annual tour. Suuzanne and Sahale followed their dad's footsteps to A&M, and a whirlwind weekend kicked off with a rugby match. Eubank paced the sidelines cheering on Suuzanne while calling football patterns for Pete on an adjacent field. "Dave doesn't like to loiter," says Karen. From there, Eubank caught a helicopter to a wedding he was officiating in Hill Country.

The next day, he's at it again at back-to-back church fundraisers. Eubank is a gifted public speaker, sincere even when he's repeating his stump speech for the 10,000th time. After a short video featuring FBR medics at work under fire, he riffs for 20 minutes about the value of sacrifice. "You can live with sorrow, but you can't live with shame," he says, with a paternal warmth that strikes a bracing contrast to his war-zone bravura. The program closes with Sahale on guitar, dressed in a native Karen vest, singing a heartfelt homage to a ranger friend killed in Karenni State in July by a Burma Army airstrike.

Some believers are in tears, hands in the air. "People say, 'I have faith,'" says Willie Medlock, 51, a technician from Wimberley, Texas. "Well, you can say what you want to, but they're living it."

THE EUBANKS' work has spread from conflict zone to conflict zone. In 2015, a Christian supporter asked if they would go to northern Iraq on his dime to help the embattled Kurdish minority. Islamic State mili-

DANGEROUS PASSAGE

The rangers cross a bamboo bridge in the remote Karen State. It takes days of hiking through the jungle to reach villages in need.

tants were gaining ground, slaughtering villagers and raping women with impunity. Eubank questioned what little FBR could do in the Mideast desert. But he saw parallels in the plight of the Karen and the Kurds, a long-oppressed people and the largest ethnic group in the world without its own country.

When he showed up with Pete, then nine years old, the Kurdish minister of defense was stunned and tried to warn him off. Eubank countered that there were lots of kids in danger who were just as important to him, and FBR's work was always a family affair. In the ensuing months, Eubank and his team, some of them ethnic volunteers from Burma, provided food and medical support to Yezidis escaping ISIS massacres. They fought alongside Kurdish *peshmerga,* and assisted in ISIS-ravaged Syrian towns such as Kobani and Manbij. "We were just going *boom-boom* from Syria to Iraq, one fight to the other," Eubank recalls.

By 2017, all attention turned to liberating Mosul, the seat of the group's self-proclaimed caliphate. As hundreds of thousands fled, FBR volunteers fought alongside Iraqi Army special forces in block-to-block combat while Karen and the kids cared for the wounded. One of Eubank's comrades was killed beside him; another took six shots and lived. In one battle, Eubank found himself four yards from a group of ISIS fighters; he was shot in the arm, but says he managed to kill three of them "point-blank" and stay in the fight.

One scorching June morning, FBR found a heap of more than 50 bodies on the outskirts of the city – men, women, and children – cut down by ISIS snipers while trying to escape. A young girl, no older than five, her hair tied with pink ribbons, peeked out from under the hijab of her dead mother. The bodies were 150 yards away, and the snipers had a clear shot. Eubank plotted a rescue. Iraqi forces coordinated a smoke barrage with the U.S.-led coalition, and he edged closer behind a tank

as bullets pinged off the armor. "If I die doing this, my wife and kids would understand," he recalls thinking. In a harrowing 12-second dash captured on video, two FBR volunteers provide cover fire as Eubank scoops up the girl and carries her to safety.

After years of operating in the shadows, Eubank was thrust into the spotlight. A Christian leader of a humanitarian group engaging in firefights in a Muslim country would normally raise alarms, but the daring rescue video was featured on cable news and talk shows; newspapers profiled the Eubanks, and a faith-based company made a documentary about FBR. Donations spiked, along with volunteer inquiries.

Eubank calls FBR "ambassadors for Jesus." Prayer and proselytizing are woven into their work. Some rangers are baptized in camp, but the group does not exclude non-believers. "You can be homosexual, you could be a murderer. You only have to say 'I don't think that's the best behavior, and I'm trying not to do those things,' and then you can join us," he says, adding that FBR includes atheists, agnostics, and spirit worshipers.

Miles Vining, a former Marine and weapons expert who converted to Islam after deployments in Afghanistan, affirms that FBR does not pressure or cast judgment like the missionary groups he grew up around as the son of American diplomats in Thailand. "I got so incredibly sick of them because everywhere I looked I got God crushed down my mouth," he says. "In FBR, everything is action-based; [Eubank and his family] are showing their faith, saying, 'Look, this is what propels us, and we want to do good deeds. And if you want some of this, come on in. But if you don't, that's OK, too' – instead of saying, 'You're going to hell.'"

Still, the group's faith-forward, weapons-bearing ethos has drawn critics who question the way FBR operates. "FBR may have saved hundreds of lives or more," writes Alexander Horstmann, an associate professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Tallinn University, "but the way the organization positions itself as an enemy of the Burma military is problematic, as is its active involvement and overlap with the ethnic-minority armies." Carrying guns stokes the age-old suspicion that aid groups are arms of intelligence agencies, and can make work more challenging for organizations that are trying to remain neutral. "Not unlike movie-hero John Rambo," Horstmann notes, "Eubank presents himself as a warrior who comes to places of conflict to liberate innocent civilians from the claws of their oppressors."

Although medics are allowed to carry guns for self-defense under international humanitarian law, a November 2019 report by Offbeat Research, an open-source investigative group, suggests FBR has gone on offensives alongside Kurdish militias in Syria, citing the group's own video footage as evidence. (FBR denied that, but did note that its members have worn YPG patches in Syria.) Moreover, FBR trains rebels in skills like battlefield communications and land-mine removal, tactics that have plausible humanitarian applications but more strictly support combat efforts. "The existence of the FBR and their actions across Syria," the report says, "blur the line of humanitarian aid and targeted activism."

"We're not a militia, but we work in bear country," says Eubank. He insists that FBR never shoots first, but makes no bones of its support for pro-democratic causes, asserting that the traditional humanitarian approach of neutrality is one that "always favors the oppressor." He notes the time a U.S. government official chastised him for aiding ethnic armed groups in Burma. The official touted Bosnia as an example where there was a "clear separation" between military and relief work, and a U.S. battalion provided security while food was distributed. "That is good," Eubank replied. "Please send the U.S. battalion to stop the Burma Army from attacking Karen, and we will gladly provide humanitarian assistance in safety."

"In many situations, resistance humanitarians are reaching people faster and better than orthodox humanitarians from neutral international agencies," writes Hugo Slim, a global authority on the ethics of war at Oxford University. Slim argues that the conventional approach often fails because it becomes bogged down by bureaucracy and requires the consent of predatory regimes, pointing out how aid agencies in Burma are seen as lacking courage, honesty, and ingenuity as they avoid proper recognition of the injustice being carried out around them. Humanitarian resistance, Slim asserts, is both ethical and essential and should be embraced "by [international aid groups] and the governments that fund them."

One veteran rights investigator concedes that he used to be an avowed pacifist who would "butt heads" with Eubank over FBR's support of ethnic armed groups. But the brute horror of the Burma Army's campaign convinced him that FBR's bold approach is essential to relieve mass suffering. "If FBR wasn't filling those voids," he asks, "who would be?"

LAUGHTER AND GRIEF

[ABOVE] The Eubanks children, Sahale, Suuzanne, and Pete, perform for volunteers to lighten the mood. [TOP] Dave consoles Suuzanne after she learns one of her "uncles" was killed by the Burma Army.

F

BR'S TRAINING CAMP sits in a valley carved by a stream in eastern Karen State. What the Eubanks started with a few bamboo huts and elephant labor has grown into a small village with a free medical clinic, spartan barracks, bunkers and training facilities, and a school for the offspring of volunteers split between "ethnics" (in FBR lingo) and foreigners, a.k.a. *galawas* (literally "white Indians"). The prevailing vibe is that of a very intense summer camp – one that is sometimes disrupted by Burma Army jets that streak low overhead.

When the Eubanks return in December – Dave, Karen, and Pete from a mission in Syria, Suuzanne and Sahale on break from college – FBR staff and hundreds of ranger trainees line up to welcome them with handmade posters and smiles. The family greets everyone and drops their bags at a two-story cabin plastered with a Bible verse from Philippians and with an office full of yellowed family photos: Eubank on the summit of Denali, and praying with Mike Pence; the girls barrel racing; Pete riding bulls. A "Wall of Heroes" features portraits of 53 rangers killed in the field since FBR was founded.

Facing a 200,000-strong military armed with Russian jets and attack helicopters has not dimmed the trainees' spirits. They represent seven of the country's ethnic groups; about a quarter are seasoned fighters. Another quarter are ethnic Burmans – teachers, students, engineers, poets, and shopkeepers – who have joined PDF militias, a shift that was unthinkable prior to the coup.

Twenty-year-old Gabaw Htoo is the face of a generation of unlikely revolutionaries. A lanky former gaming addict from the capital, Yangon, he sports

milk-bottle glasses, a shorn head, and a bullet necklace he says he won't take off until the war is over. Htoo witnessed several friends killed in street protests when rubber bullets turned to live ones. After that, he and his crew decided they needed training to "get weaponized" and join the armed resistance. They considered everything from male prostitution to selling weed to raise money for guns, until a friend connected them with rebels in the eastern jungle.

"We were like aliens," recalls Htoo in English, honed watching *Breaking Bad*. He weighed more than 200 pounds with hair that fell down to his chest. "I couldn't even hold a knife; we were useless, spoiled brats." Along with harsh terrain and lack of food, he had to overcome prejudices instilled by a racist regime that brainwashed Burmans into believing their superiority over the ethnic minorities: " 'Cannibals,' " says Htoo. "We grew up with so much propaganda."

The Karen accepted them and taught them how to survive in the bush. Months of jungle slogs, sleeping in the rain, and subsisting on rice and fish paste hardened his body and resolve. His KNLA mentor gave him the nom de guerre Gabaw Htoo ("Bright Light").

While some tech-savvy people's militias are jerry-rigging drones and 3D-printing rifles, most of Htoo's time in the KNLA was spent setting claymore mines and learning how to make homemade bombs with bamboo shafts, not always with good results. "Guys were always blowing themselves up," he says. "The training was a mess, and our leaders are so disorganized." Last year, the Burma Army ambushed his unit and killed five of Htoo's comrades. He escaped into the jungle and, after weeks on the run, linked up with his KNLA mentor, who sent him to FBR for more training – again the barrier between armed rebels and humanitarian-aid group proving permeable – though he still doesn't have a gun of his own. FBR does not issue weapons to trainees, and only a fraction of rangers have rifles. (Many are "franken-guns'' held together with homemade parts: Vietnam-era M-16s, captured Burma Army MA3 rifles, and even M-1 carbines of World War II vintage.) "I have a three-year plan," Htoo says. "The first was for failure, the past year for training, and this year will be for getting guns and fighting."

CIVILIANS TARGETED

Five civilians killed in a Burma Army attack on a village near where the FBR operates. Last year was the deadliest in the world's longest-running war.

For all his experience, Eubank likes to temper recruits' eagerness for combat. He cites a botched attack in the nearby village of Limerplaw in December as a warning. Seventy percent of KNLA grenades failed to explode. When the smoke cleared, the mission had failed, and five fighters were dead and 26 were injured. Eubank exhorts the rangers to assess the enemy carefully and question superiors if they are in doubt about an operation – but above all, to pray first. "If you are going to risk your life or take someone's life, you must be sure this is God's mission for you," he warns. "Otherwise, don't do it."

Eubank rises each morning before dawn for a five-mile run and calisthenics. Then he takes care of email and other administrative tasks he loathes, then tours the camp. He'll "stress test" his kids at random, handing them an M-16 and calling out worst-case scenarios ("You're in a helicopter, animal's getting away, and you've got a malfunction"). He picks up trash discarded by rangers ("They're cheating themselves, leaving crumbs for the Burma Army"), and his sudden presence at training stations hits the bone-tired recruits like a jolt of caffeine. On a "ranger run" with the entire class through the mountains, he crests a summit and orders everyone to the ground for pushups. "Easy way or hard way," he yells out after 20. "Hard way!" comes the response, and Eubank bangs out 10 more.

Decades of wear and tear have taken their toll, and Eubank's body is slowing a bit but "his brain and competitiveness are not," says Dave Small, an ex-Canadian Army officer who has worked with Eubank since he was 15. "He can still out-endure anyone – and that's just mental. He goes as hard as he can."

During the annual basketball game between ethnics and galawas, a shirtless Eubank is all hustle. He's setting picks and stifling his man. But [*Cont. on 80*]

Hey Hollywood,

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Reviews

Music

KESHA FINDS A NEW FREEDOM

Amid ongoing legal struggles, the singer's fifth LP is some of her most daring music yet

By BRITTANY SPANOS

Kesha
Gag Order
RCA

FOR ALMOST a decade, Kesha's career and life have been in a state of purgatory as she's been locked in a legal battle that has at times left her with a precarious future. On the two albums she released in the midst of endless court hearings, she put up an empowered front, searching for hope in the face of uncertainty.

Gag Order – a brilliant name for her latest album – says "screw that." On her fifth LP, Kesha is tired, angry, and vicious. There's a lot she still can't say, but she unspools as much of her feelings as she can across 13 scorched-earth tracks that present an artist pulling herself back up from the brink of madness.

The most striking element of Kesha's latest is the sound; working with producer ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Carla Fuentes

KESHA

Rick Rubin, she has found a psychedelic middle ground between the sleazy synths of her 2012 breakthrough, *Warrior,* and the rootsy and Southern rock of her past two, 2017's *Rainbow* and 2020's *High Road*. The songs oscillate between introspective, ambient folk tunes and bold, grunge-y electro-clash.

Lyrically, *Gag Order* is a study in being open about being irreparably changed by trauma. Kesha still hopes for hope itself, but more often, she's allowing herself to be honest about the damage done to her mental health, career, and relationships by years of battling her old producer Dr. Luke, whom she accused of sexual and emotional abuse and whose label she is still technically signed to.

"Something to Believe In" opens the LP like a solemn prayer: "I sit and watch the pieces fall/I don't know who I am at all," she offers, before admitting, "You never notice you need something to believe in." The spare "Living in My Head" is a gorgeous tapestry of anxiety and self-loathing, with the singer trying to free herself from the chaos in her mind. Following that, she slips down a rabbit hole: "This is where you fuckers pushed me/Don't be surprised if shit gets ugly," she sings on "Fine Line." As it progresses, she walks a fine line between "genius and crazy." On "Only Love Can Save Us Now," she straddles the tension between justice and pettiness: "I'm gettin' sued 'cause my mom has been tweetin'/Don't fucking tell me that I'm dealing with reason."

There's a shocking amount of softness from Kesha here, with songs like "Too Far Gone" pulsing like a funeral march for the girl she used to be. "All I Need Is You" reaches out to someone – or everyone – to lift her up. Carrying the album is that same silly humor that always made Kesha a pop star cut from an animal-print-patterned cloth of her own. On "The Drama," she reflects, "In the next life I wanna come back as a house cat," for the final minute and a half.

She may never find the rainbow she once sang about, but that doesn't mean she isn't radically advocating for her own happy ending. The album even ends with "Happy," a weary but lovely ballad dedicated to life not turning out the way you hope. As she sings on that song, she's gotta laugh so she doesn't die. Even that is its own kind of victory. ®

JESSIE WARE'S DANCE FEVER

The U.K. singer offers a euphoric survey of disco and house music

By JON FREEMAN

HEAR THIS

Jessie Ware
That! Feels Good!
INTERSCOPE

JESSIE WARE'S 2020 release, *What's Your Pleasure?,* was one of the early pandemic's great musical revelations – a pop album that successfully brought the movement, yearning, and euphoria of the dance club into everyone's homes. It was a perfect setting for the British singer-songwriter's voice, luxurious and sophisticated but still highly accessible.

Ware's follow-up to that achievement, titled *That! Feels Good!,* further zeroes in on the many pleasures of dance music. Bodies and bodily sensations are emphasized, while inhibitions are shaken off in pursuit of personal and communal ecstasy. It's also brighter and funkier than its predecessor, full of big brass and grooves that amplify the feeling of joy.

The title track – co-penned by Ware – opens with an orgy of breathy voices uttering the title phrase before transforming into a limber disco-funk jam somewhere between Prince and Stevie Wonder. "Just remember: Pleasure is a right," Ware sings.

That's a recurring theme throughout the album. On the single "Free Yourself," Ware flips into disco-diva mode with an anthem of sexual liberation for queer and straight people alike. "Free yourself, keep on moving up that mountaintop/Why don't you please yourself?" she sings. She seems to run the entire length of her considerable vocal range, belting the choruses and nodding to Donna Summer's eternal "I Feel Love" as the song shifts from piano-driven disco to piano-driven house and then back again for its final vamp.

Sometimes Ware just embraces the feeling of being unabashedly horny. "Freak Me Now" opens with some porn-worthy moaning before turning into sticky electro-funk. On "Shake the Bottle," she offers a sly instruction manual on how to get her off. And in the velvety disco tune "These Lips," she describes a sensation of erotic intrigue: "These two lips could do so much more," she purrs.

It's certainly not overlong at 10 tracks, but *That! Feels Good!* does seem front-loaded with its punchiest tunes. Still, there are moments in the back half that really work, like the lithe, airy "These Lips" and the body-positive "Beautiful People," which sounds like smoothed-out LCD Soundsystem.

The LP is at its best when it pinpoints the connection between body and emotion. "Begin Again" sounds like something out of the classic Salsoul catalog, with lush, choral melodies cascading through the groove. "Why does all the purest love get filtered through machines?" Ware wonders. It's a plea for the kind of community only a dance floor can provide. ®

FROM TOP: JACK GRANGE; BRIAN HIGBEE

BREAKING

Joy Oladokun's Helpful Anthems

JOY OLADOKUN'S second major-label LP is probably the only record this year that'll feature Houston rapper Maxo Kream, Chris Stapleton, and jam-band Manchester Orchestra. A Black queer artist, this singer-songwriter makes what she calls "helpful anthems," with real mass reach. *Proof of Life* swerves from the existential toughness and distorted guitars of "We're All Gonna Die" to "Changes," a roots-country tune that references the L.A. riots, to "Revolution," which features Kream and evokes Eighties Afropop. Oladokun graciously flows this diverse mix together, creating an open-ended and satisfying whole. **JON DOLAN**

THE NATIONAL: MORE PAIN, MORE GAIN

The Brooklyn sad-dad kings return with one of their best albums yet By JON DOLAN

ON THE NATIONAL'S almost-too-perfectly titled *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, the undisputed kings of Brooklyn sad-dad rock are back together for the first time in four years, and absolutely on point, delivering a record that will stand out as a dark gem in their catalog. The band has been off doing other things; Aaron and Bryce Dessner helped create a couple of landmark Taylor Swift albums (she pays them back with an appearance here), and singer Matt Berninger released his solo debut in 2020. Their renewed commitment to the National project is palpable. "Eucalyptus" is a gorgeous snapshot of a relationship's last intimate moments, as Berninger divvies up personal possessions ("What about the Cowboy Junkies? What about the Afghan Whigs?") and the band gorgeously builds tension. With its electro-groove, surging bass, and luminous guitar shadings, "Tropic Morning News" piles up genteel recrimination before lifting off into a beautiful mind-clearing chorus. The eidetically detailed "New Order T-Shirt" might be the most heart-splittingly pretty post-breakup remembrance of the band's career. As usual, their lachrymose indie rock is refined with tasteful studio touches (the minor-key piano and skittering beat of "Alien"; an empathetic shared-vocal uplift from Phoebe Bridgers on the ballad "This Isn't Helping"), making for an album where the gathering darkness feels more than ever like a comfort rather than a curse. "I'm not doing anyone any kind of favors," Berninger informs us over the elegantly hesitant piano of "Once Upon a Poolside." But the favor he does is the simple act of keeping the heartaches coming.

The National
First Two Pages of Frankenstein
4AD

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OF GODS AND TEENAGERS

Disney's 'American Born Chinese' mixes supernatural action-adventure with a tender coming-of-age story

ALAN SEPINWALL

American Born Chinese

NETWORK	Disney+
PREMIERES	May 24
STARRING	Ben Wang Jim Liu Yeo Yann Yann Chin Han Michelle Yeoh Ke Huy Quan

OSCAR WINNER Ke Huy Quan plays a fairly minor role in the Disney+ family series *American Born Chinese*. But there may be no more important character to convey what the show is trying to do, and how well it succeeds at most of it.

Chinese is a complicated mix of elements. Centered on the struggles of awkward teenager Jin (Ben Wang), it is a grounded coming-of-age story one minute, a supernatural escape with Wuxia fights between ancient Chinese gods the next. Sprinkled in with all of that is a lot of commentary about how Asian characters have been portrayed in pop culture in the past. Quan is part of that last component, appearing sporadically at first on phone and TV screens as Freddy Wong, a clumsy racist caricature from a corny, fake Nineties sitcom, whose "What could go Wong?" catchphrase has found a second life as a TikTok meme. Freddy's newfound viral fame is a thorn in the side of Jin, who just wants to be accepted by the cool kids at his predominantly white high school and is mortified when they connect him with Freddy's buffoonery. Eventually, though, Quan gets to also play Jamie, the actor who found success as Freddy, then saw his career vanish in much the same fashion Quan's own did for several decades before *Everything Everywhere All at Once* brought it back to life.

On a reunion special for the sitcom, Jamie laments the kinds of stereotypical roles he was offered before giving up on the business, adding, "I hope there's a kid out there watching this who feels he doesn't have to be a punchline. Who believes that he can be the hero."

American Born Chinese seems determined to prove Jamie right, not only in showing how Jin learns to stand up for himself, but also in pairing him with Wei-Chen (Jim Liu), a gawky exchange student who turns out not to be the son of a Chinese businessman, but of Sun Wukong (Daniel Wu), the superpowered Monkey King of Chinese legend. Wei-Chen has come to suburban America to prevent the destruction of heaven by the vengeful Bull Demon (Leonard Wu), and believes Jin can aid him in this quest.

The series gradually brings in Quan's *Everything* co-stars Michelle Yeoh, James Hong, and Stephanie Hsu, with Yeoh the most prominent as Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, Compassion, and Kindness. And it shares a similar sense of ambition to that movie. In adapting Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, there is a sense that writer Kelvin Yu is trying to squeeze in every genre, every theme, all at once, after so many decades of Asian Americans being denied the opportunity to participate in most stories as more than two-dimensional side characters.

Such lofty creative goals engender a certain degree of risk, and there are times when the blend of larger-than-life action adventure with kitchen-sink realism doesn't really work. Jin takes Wei-Chen's true identity and mission shockingly in stride, for instance. It's distracting to see him sucking up to the guys on the soccer team or nervously flirting with classmate Amelia (Sydney Taylor) once he knows what else is happening. But other aspects – like the parallels between Sun Wukong's feud with Bull Demon and tensions in the marriage of Jin's immigrant parents, Simon (Chin Han) and Christine (Yeo Yann Yann) – very much live up to Guanyin's insistence that "everything is more connected than you think."

"I just want to be a regular guy who does regular things," Jin says at one point. It's not quite Jamie's rallying cry, but even Jin's insistence on being normal – in a pop-cultural space where characters who look like him have rarely gotten the chance to be that – feels both relatable and admirable. *American Born Chinese* doesn't always find the right balance between its regular and extraordinary elements, but it sure is a blast to watch it try.

Quan dishes out life lessons.

CARLOS LOPEZ-CALLEJA/DISNEY, 2

[*Cont. from 42*] illusion that fame could pull her out of her own head and deposit her into another one. "I expected to go to the Met Gala or meet somebody I idolized and to reach a new level of happiness that I never felt before," she says at the Sunset Tower bar. "What I found was I felt that same level of happiness as when I won a cheer competition in middle school. I assumed that if I reached the level that I'm at now, I would be sort of invincible and my mind would be expanded, and I'd experience emotions I'd never experienced. I was expecting to feel a feeling that literally doesn't exist. It's like flying to Mars and expecting to find a new color."

News flash: There are no new colors. There are no new bodies. There are no new heads. There's just her own, in which, she says, "I'm constantly finding myself in an existential crisis, 24/7, all the time." Even now. *Especially* now that the past five years of her life have warp-sped her through the socioeconomic spectrum, through the ranks of celebrity, and through such an extensive amount of surreal real-life experience. Especially now that she's given herself permission to slow the fuck down and reflect on all of this, and has turned that reflection into her actual job.

Which means that it behooves her to have questions and not have answers. My sense of a normal day in the life of Emma Chamberlain? She wakes up and thinks. She has coffee and thinks. She works out and thinks. She looks at mood boards and thinks. She drives around and thinks. She makes voice memos and creates bullet points and thinks them through out loud in her upstairs room with a camera rolling. A few days before we first met, she'd done a podcast episode titled "Is Creativity Dead?" A few days later, she'd released "We Know Nothing." And if you think whatever ideas she posited in the former might be canceled out by the latter, that's exactly the sort of thing that she wants you to ponder. The thinking-not-knowing is where her instincts have taken her. The thinking-not-knowing is where she's decided she should psychologically be. "I'm an overthinker," she says. "I don't necessarily fully have a grasp on my identity, but that's part of my identity. I feel comfortable there."

Indeed, few have ever discussed their own mental struggles in such a bright and cheery way as Chamberlain does on *Anything Goes*. Or talked about their body dysmorphia with such self-acceptance. Or given advice with so many caveats. "I always say, 'Listen, I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about.' If you're like, 'Emma, that's not true,' I'm like, 'OK, I know.' I'm the first one to say that I don't know. But I don't feel like I need to necessarily read four books to put my opinion out there," she says, summing up her generation (and part of her appeal to that generation) in 18 words. "Even just coming to three different possible conclusions could make me feel satisfied."

Not that satisfaction comes particularly easily to an overthinker. At the hotel bar, Chamberlain spends a long time talking about her relationship with singer-songwriter Tucker Pillsbury – known professionally as Role Model – and how their happiness, counterintuitively, is also the source of much of her anxiety. "I will say right now, my anxiety has been very bad," she says. "I think it's scary for me at times to rely on people so heavily, whether it's my parents or Tucker. I mean, because of my circumstance, there are so few people in my life who I truly feel I can trust that the fear of anything happening to them is unbearable to me." She tells me that her social circle now consists of exactly six people: her friend Amanda, who she meets for yoga; her stylist Jared Ellner and his boyfriend, Owen, who she meets for shopping; her parents, who are "very nonjudgmental, very open-minded"; and Pillsbury, who "knows all my flaws, all my shortcomings" and still sticks around. After years of fan speculation, Chamberlain and Pillsbury recently took their relationship public, something Chamberlain previously had imagined that she'd never do. "I know it's incredibly vulnerable to say out loud, but Tucker is a complete rock for me," she says. "You know when you're with somebody, and it becomes like you're almost cellularly bonded? I mean, to be honest, I don't feel impulsive saying that I would marry him, because just being around him brings me back to earth. Seeing the way that he carries himself, I'm like, 'All right, I'm fucking losing it, and there's no reason to be losing it.'" Plus, she adds, "We don't enable each other. If I were to show Tucker something I did creatively, and he didn't agree, he would fucking tell me. And he has."

At some point this year, Chamberlain plans to start inviting guests onto the podcast for the first time, people she hopes will disagree with her too. "I am excited about talking to people who are specialists in topics that I have discussed in the past," she says. "I'm excited to get into the thick of it and have somebody be like, 'No, Emma, you're actually wrong,' because when I'm wrong, it's almost like correcting. It's like putting a puzzle piece in – but then also knowing that my mind might change again tomorrow."

In the meantime, she concedes, her mind might change about making more YouTube videos. "If I'm in the mood to film some shit, I'm going to do it," she says at one point. "But God knows what that's going to be. It's not going to be like anything I've ever done." Maybe she'll make documentaries. Maybe she'll edit films. Maybe, she says, she'll just retreat, open a coffee shop, settle down, have a few kids, an experience she imagines to be "humbling" and full of wonder and entirely incomprehensible, so of course it's in her lane.

It's getting dark outside the windows of the bar by the time Chamberlain starts indicating that she should probably go. Her dad is in town, and she plans to cook a vegetarian dinner for him. "I have to make him pesto pasta with a side of some sort of vegetable, probably Brussels sprouts," she says. Afterward, she suspects that Pillsbury will come over for one of the jam sessions he and her dad like to have. "We call it band practice, where I play the drums, Tucker plays acoustic guitar, my dad will play electric," she says of their music, which, she clarifies is "never to be released, only to be done in the privacy of my back room." She laughs. "I'm terrible."

But, you know, sometimes you just need to jam, to go by instinct, to follow what feels right. There's still so much to ponder, so many questions to ask. Still so many unscripted and unscriptable answers, and Chamberlain is here for that. The Spotify appearance the next day won't go entirely as (not) planned – there will be moments when she repeats herself or gets tangled up in her thoughts – but sometimes that's just the way it goes when the answers aren't written. "I didn't nail it," Chamberlain will say, not unhappily, as she exits the stage. "That was one of my worst performances. But it came from a real place." As long as it comes from a real place, it's fine, really. It really is fine. That's the one thing she knows for sure.

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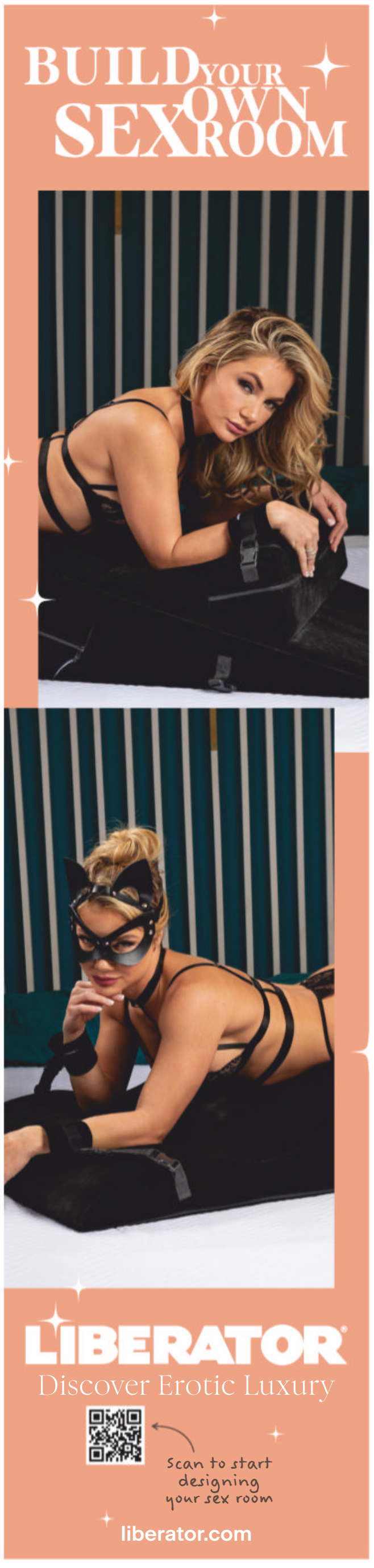


HOUSE MUSIC'S CIVIL WAR

[*Cont. from 63*] Casablanca and Demon. The last time Vince saw Larry, in the spring of 2018, Larry had a storefront in Lynwood. Looking thin and weakened, he sat amid industrial pallets full of used vinyl. It looked to Vince like he was buying up inventory from closing-down pressing plants – probably to sell on eBay. Vince had gone out there with a Kanye West associate, and he watched Larry cheerfully "clear" a sample of the Trax cut "Boom Boom," which West used on "Lift Yourself." (Vince says that Larry promised him a cut of the payment from West's team, and then, as if for old times' sake, didn't give it to him.) Larry asked about Vince's son and said he was proud of everything Vince had achieved. Larry died of heart failure in April 2020. Rachael says that she, Tessa, and Sandyee buried him in a cardboard box, in a plot by a highway, across a chain-link fence from a car dealership. His burial was paid for by a Jewish charity that, among other services, puts up money when the alternative is cremation, which traditionally isn't permitted for Jews.

After she lost the label to Casablanca, Rachael took a year to, as she puts it, "pull herself together," then around 2007 started a new label, Phuture Trax, with her own roster of artists. She kept writing music, performing, and DJ'ing. She also married a former rodeo rider turned construction executive. (George Clinton was the best man.)

On Jan. 1, 2022, two years after Larry died, Rachael finally got the use of the rights to the classic Trax catalog back from Demon. For the first time, she had the chance to run the label exactly as she wanted. But her problems would only multiply.

LAKE POINT TOWER is a significant address. Famous athletes – Scottie Pippen, Sammy Sosa– have all called it home, as has former Obama adviser David Axelrod. When they let you past reception, toward the elevators, you pass a wall covered by a sheet of falling water. The elevators let out onto a large, empty, bright white room the shape of a triangle with the corners rounded off. It feels like an airlock on the *Enterprise* or, perhaps, a forgotten anteroom in Kanye's mind.

Rachael's address in the building has become a totem of her perceived exploitation of the Trax artists. It's easy to see how. A window looks down, literally, on the city. But when I visited in January, there were no clean Mies van der Rohe lines; there were ancient sofas hidden with throws. You could shut the bathroom door but not all the way – you'd get locked in. The place is ankle-deep in old tapes and dusty Trax paraphernalia; there were also several display cases of Steiff bears, along with the taxidermied remains of Boss, the Trax warehouse cat.

Rachael's current husband, the construction executive, has bankrolled her dogged pursuit of Trax. When the bank threatened to foreclose on the Lake Point apartment in 2007, he bought it from Larry for $525,000. He's thrown a significant chunk of his own fortune into legal fees and other Trax expenses. He recently sold the apartment, which was on the market for $515,000.

The various battles – against Casablanca, against Demon, against Larry, and now against Vince and Jesse and 21 others – have ground on the couple's relationship. "He's sick of it," says Rachael. "It's almost destroyed my marriage." (Her husband, who requested that he not be named, declined to comment.) Meanwhile, in November, a promoter for a gig Rachael was due to play took her name off the flyers. Rachael says he told her she's become a pariah in the house world.

"When [Vince and the other plaintiffs] didn't help to save this company for all those years, I risked everything," Rachael says, adding, "What I see is – Vince, you left the label in 1986.... Your name is not on one corporation. You weren't the one who fought. I was the one who fought."

Vince says he knew early on that Larry was screwing him and the other artists. He never considered suing. Why? Partly because they couldn't afford a lawsuit back then, but also because "it's Uncle Larry." The Trax kids had a kind of twisted attachment to Larry, according to Vince. Sure, Larry was cheating them, but at least he let them put out their work in the first place – Vince says established Black-owned labels didn't see the potential in the house sound until long after Larry started making the records.

But now, Uncle Larry is out of the picture. "I think it comes down to the fact that [the artists] were loyal to my dad, not to Rachael," says Tessa Sherman. "With his name still on Trax, they didn't have much of a fight against his decisions, and now he's not here to fight on these decisions."

To Jefferson, the Trax situation is consistent with systemic, long-standing problems with the music industry. "Any record deal is skewed in the label's favor to begin with," he says. "I think our time has just come to stick our feet into the ground, brace ourselves, and go for our rights, man. This happens with every artist. I suspect it happened with Little Richard; it happened with the Chess artists, you know, Muddy Waters. And now it's happening with us. At a certain point, you just fight for your rights."

Vince says the Trax fight is about specific people – regardless of their race – who have mistreated some other specific people. But, he says, the fight also takes place in a context that goes back generations and reaches beyond the music industry and Chicago: "Black people have been dealing with the shit end of the stick forever. You can't get into the club without four IDs. But you don't stop going to the club. Taking the bullshit is an act of resistance."

He thinks he didn't sign papers to protect his share of Trax in the early days because in some, perhaps subconscious, sense he simply never expected a fair deal – so why reach for one? And if he's not careful, he might teach that to London: "I consciously level the playing field so he understands he can do whatever the fuck he wants." Part of that lesson, he says, requires getting the rights to his music back from Trax. ("I feel treatment of artists has nothing to do with skin color," Rachael responds. "There is not a racist bone in my body, and Larry wasn't racist either.")

In June 2020, two months after Larry's death, Ben Mawson's TaP, the management firm behind Lana Del Rey, bankrolled prominent Trax artists Larry Heard and Robert Owens, who recorded hits including "Can You Feel It" and "Washing Machine" (with Heard using the name Mr. Fingers), to sue Trax for "not less than $1 million." Trax settled, and Heard and Owens got their rights back.

Vince Lawrence, Jesse Saunders, Marshall Jefferson, and the 20 other plaintiffs filed their case in October 2022. The suit, filed in the Northern District of Illinois, claims Trax "knowingly submitted materially false information to the Copyright Office by claiming ownership in Plaintiffs' compositions and sound Recordings" – in short, that it claimed it had the rights

to the music (and with it the ability to collect royalties) when it didn't. And, the plaintiffs allege, Trax won't be able to produce paperwork to prove it owns the recordings. The plaintiffs are seeking $150,000 for each master recording they allege Trax fraudulently registered.

The plaintiffs are also asking the court to "invalidate" the copyright registrations that Trax has claimed, in effect returning – or, they would say, recognizing – the artists' exclusive ownership of their copyright. The same suit claims that in 2007 Rachael registered the Trax logo with the trademark office even though she knew it belonged to Vince, and that Trax's registration should be canceled, which would allow Vince to register it.

Trax says either that it has valid contracts or that valid contracts have been lost in its various ordeals, and provided a 1986 contract to ROLLING STONE for Jefferson's "Move Your Body (The House Music Anthem)." (It promises a $6,400 advance with a royalty at 15 percent, among other terms.) Jefferson claims Trax has forged or amended his contracts, including the one for "Move Your Body."

"Rachael, I think she's holding onto that catalog out of spite," Jefferson says. "I don't think anyone ever respected her talent. So this was Rachael's revenge.... She really wasn't that talented, we felt. That's how *I* felt." ("Marshall Jefferson saying that I am hanging on to the catalog out of spite is petty," Rachael says. "My talent speaks for itself.")

Meanwhile, even Jesse and Vince don't seem to be able to agree on the basics – the suit says the two of them founded it with Larry, but Jesse now says via email that he was more focused on music than the label. "I didn't have a role in Trax," he said.

Richard Darke, who has been representing Rachael since 2005, says that he believes the resentment against her and Trax is based in part on some significant misunderstandings. "I don't know how Larry and Rachael treated all the artists, but I do know that in 2007 and on, it really was not Rachael and Larry's responsibility to pay all these artists," Darke says. "It should have been Casablanca, and then it should have been Casablanca via Demon." Rachael, he claims, wasn't responsible for paying artists until January 2022. ("As much as Casablanca would like to correct impressions about the business dealings of the Trax entities," said Caren A. Lederer, an attorney representing Casablanca, "these companies were parties to years-long litigation that ended in 2012 with a binding settlement agreement that included a non-disparagement provision.... Casablanca has and will continue to honor this obligation." Emma Burch, a representative for Demon Music Group, said: "During the period from 2007 to 31 December 2021, Demon Music Group was a licensee of Casablanca Trax Inc. As a licensee, Demon Music Group was not responsible for artist payments. The contractual responsibility for artist payments sat with the licensor or relevant rights owner.")

On March 6, Sandyee's attorney asked a judge to dismiss the lawsuit, claiming the plaintiffs don't allege what musical works were infringed on, "by whom, or ... how and/or when" they were infringed, that certain defendants should not have been named in the first place, and that the allegations are lacking in substance. On April 3, attorneys for Trax and Rachael joined them in demanding the case be dismissed for the same reason. The court has yet to respond.

Lita Rosario-Richardson, a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer who specializes in music rights, says Trax and Rachael are in a lose-lose spot. If they can't come up with valid contracts to support their copyright registrations, they'll be considered to have filed copyright fraudulently. But if they can come up with the contracts, they'll owe whatever royalties the artists are due per those contracts. She suspects Vince may have more trouble arguing that he owns the logo, since what matters with trademarks is not so much who owns them as who is using them – and Trax, clearly, has been using the mark that he claims is his.

With the plaintiffs seeking $150,000 per master, a ruling in their favor would almost certainly bankrupt Trax. Rosario-Richardson suggests Rachael's best move may be to settle – much as with Heard and Owens – and hope to simply "return" the rights to the artists without paying damages.

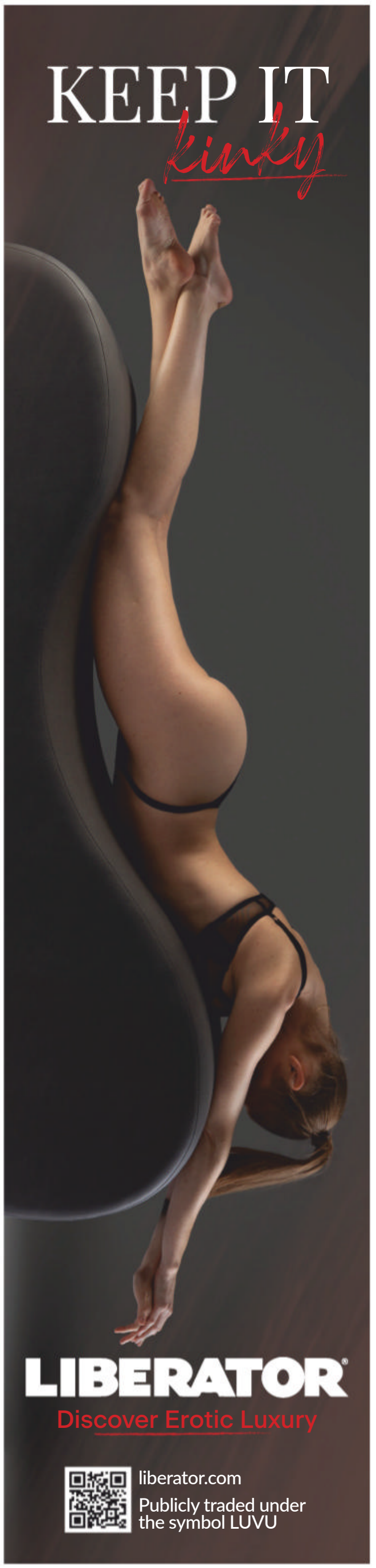
As if all that wasn't complicated enough, the legal situation behind the suits is decidedly messy: Greg Roselli, who represents Sandyee, used to be Rachael's attorney, and before Mulroney, Vince's attorney, sued Trax, he represented a buyer in an aborted attempt to purchase the label. Meanwhile, Roselli hopes to set up Trax in the U.K., where he's based, and Mulroney has suggested that he himself might be the general counsel for a new, Vince-led Trax, should their suit skittle Rachael out of the way. (Roselli, as Sandyee's attorney, says, "As to the future, Sandyee Sherman's vision is to reestablish the label by working things out with the Trax legendary artists." Mulroney said, "The artists will decide who they want to work with, and I do hope I will be part of it.") Meanwhile, Rachael and Sandyee are suing each other, Rachael is suing one of the lawyers, and there are various disputes over the divorce settlements and will.

Despite Mulroney's suggestion of a new Vince-led Trax, Vince – who owns a studio and already has an organization, Slang Music Group, that provides music for commercials and movies – says that he doesn't want to "take over" the label. "I just want people to have what belongs to them," he says.

Rachael – who has only had full control over the classic catalog since Jan. 1, 2022, when she got the use of it back from Demon – says that part of the terms of the return of the rights was a fund of approximately $100,000 to be divided among the artists. She also says that 50 percent of the income from those tracks since January 2022 has been put in escrow to be distributed among the artists, and has sent out letters to classic Trax artists asking for tax documents that would allow them to be paid. She says Trax has also engaged royalties-accounting firm Infinite Catalog to manage the distribution of payments.

The theory among some in the Trax camp is that when Demon handed the catalog back to Rachael last year, it didn't do so out of generosity. Demon knew, the theory goes, that litigation might be coming and, perhaps, that the perception that the venerable BBC, Demon's parent company, was stiffing artists would be scandalous. (Demon responds: "This is factually inaccurate. Demon Music Group, as licensee, not rights owner, provided all relevant royalty statements directly to its licensor, Casablanca Trax Inc., and the rights owner was responsible for making artist payments.")

Rachael is heartbroken, but she's not letting go. "When I started the journey, no one, absolutely no one, believed I could ever win against Casablanca.... I am the only person who just believed in persevering, and somehow all that finally ended only to start this new terrible chapter," she says. "There were so many times in my life where I'd be losing everything. Losing people I love; losing everything I have. And now it's happening again."



[*Cont. from 71*] the man guarding him keeps fouling; after one too many, Eubank snaps, grabs him by the shoulders, and throws him to the ground. After the game ends with the foreigners on top, Eubank pulls the ranger he slammed in for a hug.

Later on, I accompany Eubank downriver to meet Gen. Baw Gyaw, the battle-hardened leader of the KNLA. I struggle to keep pace as Eubank explains that it was Baw Gyaw, a fellow Christian, who granted him the land for FBR's training camp and free movement across his territory. "None of this would be possible without Baw Gyaw's blessing," says Eubank. "He trusts us."

We cross a bamboo bridge and strip camouflage netting off an FBR truck for the drive to Da Bu No. Once home to 5,000 people, the village has become a ghost town of shuttered shops and derelict homes. Repeated Burma Army bombings since the coup have wiped out families, shredded school houses, and leveled a KNLA command center. "Everyone is hiding in the jungle," Eubank says. "It's really sad."

Baw Gyaw receives us at a teak house surrounded by guards with M-4 rifles. Eubank gives him a big hug and gifts him a Ka-Bar knife and some fresh FBR shirts. A short, stocky man dressed in jungle boots and fatigues, the general has a shrapnel scar on his left temple and changes shirts to reveal additional scars down his chest and stomach, the markings of a lifetime of guerrilla warfare.

Eubank launches into an update on ranger training and efforts to secure outside support for the resistance. Four days earlier, President Biden had signed into law the BURMA Act, hailed by some advocates as the "most significant action" the U.S. has taken for Burma in decades. The bill pledges tighter sanctions against the junta and greater support for pro-democracy groups fighting inside the country. But aid for ethnic armies was not included, and there was no mention of arms. (Though Eubank is friendly with Republican members of Congress, he denies any connection to U.S. intelligence agencies – an assertion that appears borne out by FBR's low-budget operations and the shoddy weapons used by the rebels.)

Baw Gyaw is blunt when asked what he needs most: better weapons. The Burma Army receives aircraft and artillery from China and Russia, and there's only so much his fighters can do against such firepower. "The U.S. should have started helping us a long time ago, before the Chinese got so involved," says the general. "It's still a good time to help us."

Eubank has lobbied Congress for years to back the resistance. But the U.S. is already spending billions in its proxy war in Ukraine; neighboring Thailand has no interest in midwifing the revolution; and China, the only foreign power involved in Burma's conflicts, would not take kindly to U.S. meddling in its backyard. What's more, even if there was a will among the U.S. and Western allies to arm the resistance, the jumble of ethnic militias and PDFs lack a central command and a shared strategy to defeat the Burmese military. "Who should the West support? How and with what?" says Bertil Lintner, a specialist on Burma's affairs and insurgencies in Asia. "I can't see any significant Western support coming anytime soon."

Despite their common enemy, the major armed groups in the borderlands are plagued by disunity. In Karen, the KNLA is also fighting several breakaway Karen proxy forces allied with the regime, which long ago mastered a divide-and-conquer strategy.

"Burmese resistance movements and political opposition are their own worst enemies," says Mathieson, who has spent more than two decades studying the country. "Any viable resistance is consistently hobbled by division. Never has a country been betrayed so much by such poor leadership."

Baw Gyaw, for his part, believes victory will come in his lifetime. "It's never easy to unite all the groups, but right now most of us share the same goal, and we are committed to fighting to the end," he says, buoyed by the influx of ethnic Burmans taking up arms alongside his forces. One of his advisers estimates the Burma Army has lost more than 15,000 men out of a frontline strength of 140,000 since the coup. Many units in Karen are stranded and facing constant harassment, which has made them more dependent on airstrikes.

"You've got to think of [the Burma Army] as this giant bull in a field," explains Davis, the security analyst. "There's a lot of little dachshunds running around biting its legs. Sooner or later, the bull is going down and all these dogs are gonna be on its back, and at that point it begins to look like game over."

"Barely, imperceptibly, slowly, I think, they are weakening," Eubank agrees. "The resistance doesn't have to win, they just have to hold on."

ON MISSIONS THE rangers bring gifts and entertainment to brighten the lives of the children living in harm's way. So on a sunny morning in the village of Tho Thoo Plaw, gaggles of displaced kids look on as the Eubanks and rangers host a "Good Life Club" workshop, rocking back and forth to a pounding bass line. Volunteers perform backflips and slapstick routines and dance to Kenny Chesney's "All the Pretty Girls," before sweatshirts and cookies are handed out. It's surreal, goofy, and joyous all at once, and Eubank revels in it.

The rangers are packing up camp when he gets word that Burma Army jets have bombed Da Bu No – again. Baw Gyaw is unscathed. But a ranger and a pair of volunteers narrowly missed getting killed, and one of FBR's last four-wheel-drive trucks was totaled. "This is war," Eubank says. "We're gonna get them back." In the moment, he's more Special Forces operator than relief worker.

A short walk up the trail, we come to a school and church complex leveled by an airstrike. A Burma Army base looms above the village on a ridge just over a mile away, and fearful locals have cleared out. The Eubanks pray and film social media clips next to a blast crater. Eubank consoles a young boy wandering alone amid the wreckage and gives a wad of money to a man who's home was damaged. In the field, Eubank is quick to disburse whatever resources he has to whomever he deems in need. In 2022, a $3 million budget was all spent by October. Eubank put an urgent call out to a group of nine Christian supporters and raised an additional million dollars within a week to cover operations for the rest of the year.

The ever-present threat of attack has driven villagers to hold their Sunday service in a tarpaulin shack tucked away under a giant stand of bamboo. Eubank stands up and offers to rebuild the church. "You can build it bigger, there's no budget," he says. "Me, I ask God, and he says put it in the exact same place. You can build two – one here, one there. And if they destroy it again, we'll build it again. It's a contest between hate and love, and because of Jesus, love will win." Eubank asks everyone to pray on it. Although the fervor has gripped him, his congregation does not look convinced.

In the morning, the rangers hold another variety show at the bomb site to rally the community. Music blares and children dance, and for a few hours the war is forgotten, until Eubank announces that one of FBR's original rangers, Baw Boe, was killed earlier in the day filming a Burma Army offensive in western Karen. Baw Boe was a "*padi*" (uncle) to the Eubank kids since they were infants, carrying them on his shoulders and teaching them everything he knew about life in the jungle. Suuzanne, usually stoic, is caught off-guard by the news. Eubank apologizes for not telling her first, holding her close as tears stream down her face. Another extended family member lost and the second ranger to die in the new year.

EUBANK'S STAUNCHLY held conservative values fly in the face of his high-risk life on the extreme margins. His war stories are a torrent of near-death experiences that beggar belief: shooting his way out of ambushes, evading Burma Army forces closing in on three sides, or coming face-to-face with an ISIS fighter in a trench – the tales often close with the punchline *We almost got smoked*. A few admirers half-joked that he wants to die in the jungle. "I'll put it this way," says one longtime FBR volunteer, "things tend to happen when Dave is around."

While the Eubanks make a point of keeping their children away from the front line, the kids have survived just about every threat that comes with operating inside a war zone. This exposure has moved some to accuse the parents of recklessness – though "never," Eubank points out, "from the people we are standing with under fire."

There was the time in Syria, in 2018, when the family had to travel by public bus through Assad-controlled territory to reach Afrin, then under assault by jihadists. Recognized by *mukhabarat* agents at a checkpoint and told to wait, Eubank was not going gently to a Syrian prison. He instructed the children to walk off the bus and, if the agents gave chase, throw hand grenades he'd passed out earlier "as far as you can and run for your lives. And don't worry about me. I'm gonna throw mine, shoot everyone I can shoot, reload, and run." The Syrians shouted after the family as they stepped into the street and ran more than 400 yards to the safety of a Kurdish checkpoint.

I ask Eubank if there was ever a moment in hindsight where he felt he'd gambled with his children's lives. "No," he shoots back, with the caveat he might have been a beat too slow on deciding to leave that bus in Syria. "I know my kids and what they can do. My daughters, they're nice. But they will shoot." And apparently throw grenades.

More recently, in the Karen village of Simerplaw, a widow told the Eubanks she'd given up trying to plant rice after the Burma Army shot at her. The family followed her back to the paddy. Eubank and a ranger then crept into the paddy with handfuls of rice sprigs and a volley of gunfire poured in, bullets striking within feet of Karen and the kids at the rear. The episode was filmed and packaged into an FBR report called "Planting Rice Under Fire."

Getting shot at for a rice-planting photo-op? This smacked of a stunt. But Eubank explains how there had been cloud cover when he went into the field that unexpectedly lifted and exposed him to the enemy. He maintains that this, too, was "not reckless." When the Eubanks returned to the village seven months later, the widow, Naw Thraw Gay, presented them with a sack of rice. The Burma Army soldiers who shot at them later defected. A photo of them smiling with the Eubanks appears in FBR's annual report.

When we reach Simerplaw, Eubank summons Naw Thraw Gay to share her side of the story. I ask what she thinks of the Eubanks? Are they crazy? "No, no," she says, flashing a betel-stained smile. "They helped and gave us confidence so that we can go on with our lives. We feel braver with them among us." Indeed, after the shooting incident, she and her neighbors went back to their fields at night to finish planting rice.

Our next and final stop on the mission loop is Limerplaw, scene of the disastrous KNLA attack on the Burma Army outpost. The trail segues from dense jungle to dry paddy fields punctured by limestone formations that would be swarming with backpackers were it not for the war. Near the village, we drop into the shadow of a sheer rock wall, and the air is rent by a series of booms on the other side. Bursts of gunfire crackle through the valley, and there are rumors the KNLA has initiated another drone attack.

The fighting kicks up again when we reach camp. We're told Suuzanne, Sahale, and Pete arrived an hour before us and headed straight to a cave they have explored since they were kids. Getting to the entrance requires traversing open ground in the direct firing line of the Burma Army outpost. Eubank decides to check on them, concerned but not worried. "They know to hide in the bamboo over there if there's trouble," he says, pointing to a band that rings the base of the mountain.

Bypassing the mouth of the cave, Eubank climbs up to a ledge and discovers a rebel hideout that connects down to the main subterranean passage. I follow him up, and the floor is strewn with IV bottles, unexploded rocket-propelled grenades, and torn pants soiled with blood. Stalactites loom above us like daggers. "This is pretty cool," says Eubank, caught between war and wonder, living out a life he imagined as a boy.

Voices echo from the cave's recesses, and Pete soon emerges below with his monkey and other volunteers. Sahale is trailing behind them, singing a song. The kids reassure their father that they ducked into the bamboo when the Burma Army and KNLA started shooting, just as they were taught to. "I know you did," Eubank replies. "I love you."

THE RANGERS ASSEMBLE the next morning for a final children's program. Suuzanne and Sahale need to get back to school, and Gabaw Htoo and his fellow rangers must return to far-flung units to apply their training where it's needed most. Back on a familiar trail, I'm contemplating the warm Coke I'm going to buy at the last KNLA checkpoint when faint rumbles begin to echo across the mountains. A Russian-made Yak-130 jet screeches low overhead soon after, snapping everyone's gaze skyward. The canopy protects us. The question is, what was just hit?

At the checkpoint, Eubank gets a message on the radio: The bombs struck the village of Lay Wah, about 20 miles away, and there are conflicting reports of casualties. It's late in the day, but he wants to go check it out. Karen, Suuzanne, Sahale, and a few armed rangers jump into the flatbed of an FBR pickup, and Eubank tears off down dirt roads. The engine groans and the Eubank sisters croon "American Pie" and "Country Roads" as we rip around hairpins down to the river. A cable ferry takes us across, and we grind on until we see a truck bearing wounded.

The driver confirms that bombs leveled two local churches and a schoolhouse, killing five people, including a mother and her two-year-old girl. In the flatbed, Naw Chi Paw clutches her baby next to her teenage son. Her husband, a Catholic deacon, has been killed. Eubank puts his hand on her arm and says a prayer, then takes her phone number with a pledge to look after them. "We'll come see you at the clinic tomorrow," he assures.

It's dark when we reach Lay Wah. Our headlight catches a hobbling water buffalo whose front leg was cut in half by shrapnel. Up on the plateau overlooking the village, the school and churches are blown to splinters. Four craters are surrounded with shards of glass, flip-flops, and splotches of fresh blood. Eubank records the damage on his phone as Suuzanne collects bomb fragments, and an elementary school teacher arrives with more details. Fearing airstrikes, she had already moved her students into the bush for classes. The bombs struck at around 2 p.m. Had the kids been in school, it would have been a massacre.

Another villager bids us to follow him into the jungle. A short walk along an ink-black footpath brings us to a clearing bathed in candlelight where five bodies are laid out under sheets – or what remains of them. Unbidden, the man strips away the cloth to show what the airstrike had done. Stumps of legs were all that was left of a church assistant. The pastor, badly mangled, lies next to the deacon, mother and child, both of whom were killed by shrapnel to the head. On the drive out, the water buffalo is groaning on the ground. Eubank dutifully stops and puts the beast out of its misery by shooting it in the head.

"THIS IS EVIL, man. And this has been happening for 73 years," Eubank says on the drive back. The deaths were cruel and arbitrary, the kind that defies logic or any belief system, and they will make no difference in the outcome of this war. Eubank has seen many lifetimes worth of such killing. If there was one thing that surprised non-Christian friends who know him more than the fact that he was still alive after all these years, it was that he still believed in a God who allows innocents to be slaughtered so brutally.

"That's one of the great paradoxes of faith," he tells me. "I don't understand that to this day." He admits that he has "lots of doubts – they just don't do me any good. The result of an evidently rational response to death and suffering is a hard heart, bitterness, anger, depression," he goes on. "The opposite is to ask God for help. I'm gonna praise you and say 'I love you' no matter what. I practice that. And the result of that is I'm lighthearted, my vision is bigger, I'm bolder, and I have more energy. So which is actually the rational response?"

A week after I left Burma, Eubank began a two-month mission to Karenni State, scene of the fiercest fighting in the country. Trips to Syria and Iraq would follow, and friends are pushing him to go to Ukraine. Part of him wants to bring FBR to a new frontier, but "we're just not that big," he says, torn between a compulsive drive and spreading FBR too thin as the civil war in Burma deepens and the world looks away.

Eubank recalled a time when Armenian friends requested FBR's help in their fight against Azerbaijan. He was interested, but the trip didn't work out, which Pete assured him was for the best. "He said, 'I'm glad we didn't go, Dad. We're FBR. We go to the broken places with no rules, like the Wild West – that's where we belong,'" Eubank says. "And I think he's right." ®

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Julia Louis-Dreyfus

The actress on smoking weed, staying married, and bitching with Larry David

Your new movie, *You Hurt My Feelings*, centers on a novelist having a crisis of confidence after she overhears a scathing critique by her husband. Is there a piece of negative criticism that's stuck with you?
I got a bad review very, very early on in my career from [TV critic] Tom Shales in *The Washington Post*, and it was particularly stinging to me because my family lived in Washington, D.C., and I spent half of my childhood in D.C. It was for *Saturday Night Live*. And you know what? He wasn't wrong.

> ***Louis-Dreyfus' latest movie, 'You Hurt My Feelings,' is out May 26.***

Despite their big argument in the film, your character, Beth, and her husband seem to have a healthy relationship. You've been married for 36 years. What's the secret to a lasting union?
I think there's an element of luck involved. You have to, in my case, marry the right guy. People ask me this and I don't really know what to say! I just really enjoy his company. I like to have life adventures with him, and I don't know what I'd do without him. I have no advice there, just: Good luck! That's my advice.

Beth's son works in a weed shop, which made me curious: Do you smoke weed?
I wish I could. I did when I was in college, *a lot*, and then something happened, and I started to get paranoid whenever I smoked pot. I've tried multiple times to go back to it, but I cannot. It makes me *nuts*. And I get very unhappy with it. So, it's not for me.

What do you do to unwind and relax?
You mean what drugs do I take? [*Laughs*.] I exercise a ton, and I love to hike. I love good food, good wine. And when I remember, I knit.

What was your most ambitious knitting project?
It's truly unimpressive: It was a very excellent hat [*laughs*]. But it was good! I've made a few of them. I have a pattern I go to. What's nice about making a hat is that it's a quick project. Doesn't take super long. Like a beanie. A really, really good beanie.

Now that *Seinfeld* is on Netflix, newer generations are enjoying it. What's your theory on why it's remained so timeless?
I just think funny is funny! It was superb writing and, dare I say, a superb cast that supported the writing – and perhaps even elevated it sometimes. It was fuckin' lightning in a bottle.

Do you remember the first time you met Larry David?
It was back in the *SNL* days. We spent a lot of time complaining together because he couldn't get his sketches on the air and I couldn't get anything meaningful or funny to do on the air, so we were bitching and moaning in his office a lot. That was the general memory I have of that time. I do remember meeting Jerry for the first time, and he was eating a bowl of cereal.

You had another long TV run on *Veep*. What was it like when Trump took office and reality became even crazier than the show?
Well, we ended the show! That's what happened [*laughs*]. They were doing a better version of our show, but of course it wasn't funny at all. It was tragic. And we just couldn't compete with that shit.

How did you land the role of Valentina Allegra de Fontaine in the Marvel movies, and what's it like to act in these massive superhero projects?
It's an absolute gas. I met with Kevin Feige and Louis D'Esposito at Marvel, and we had a lovely conversation. My [two sons] are huge Marvel fans, and I thought my boys would get a kick out of it. And then it happened! I had to immediately educate myself on this world, because there are so many characters and so many universes and these lives are so intertwined. I'm by no means a scholar when it comes to the Marvel universe, but I'm working on it.

What's the best piece of advice you've gotten?
My high school physics teacher said, "Have fun at all costs." I know that's a dangerous phrase, and can be misunderstood, but there was a lot to be said for the notion of pursuing fun. And I took his advice.

What advice would you give young women who are breaking into comedy?
Wear sunscreen.

MARLOW STERN

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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